

Language Endangerment and Preservation in South Asia

ed. by Hugo C. Cardoso

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Foreword

Hugo C. Cardoso

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When it comes to language, few corners of the globe are as diverse as South Asia. Throughout history, this has been an area of high multilingualism and intense linguistic contact, leading to often extreme processes of change, linguistic conflict and accommodation, as well as the emergence of new languages. However, while diversity may be the order of the day in South Asia, language obsolescence and loss have now become equally conspicuous. As a matter of fact, the most linguistically diverse countries in this region feature prominently in the worldwide charts of linguistic endangerment. In UNESCO's online (and constantly evolving) *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, for instance, India has more entries than any other country, viz. 197 (in December 2012). Other countries in the region with a significant presence in the *Atlas* include Nepal (71 languages listed), Pakistan (28), Afghanistan (23) and Bhutan (19); only the Maldives are absent.

In South Asian nations, there is an established tradition of research and reflection on the preservation of linguistic and cultural diversity. Yet, given the enormity of the task, more needs to be done to understand the causes of linguistic endangerment and design solutions. It is the intention of this volume to contribute to the debate by focusing on specifically South Asian problems, processes and constraints, from both a synchronic and a

diachronic perspective. As expected, most of the languages studied are, by most definitions, currently endangered - the type of languages that might feature in UNESCO's *Atlas*. However, some authors also discuss languages whose vitality (and even dominance in some domains) seems assured in the near future. Their articles are a reminder that language endangerment is a complex and multi-faceted issue, and call for long-term approaches to language preservation.

The idea to edit a volume on language endangerment and language preservation in South Asia followed from a scholarly panel dedicated to the topic which convened at ISCTE-IUL in Lisbon (Portugal) on July 25th 2012, as part of the 22nd *European Conference on South Asian Studies*. I am particularly indebted to the authors for their contributions and patient revisions of their texts, and also to the numerous reviewers who collaborated in the editorial process. A special word of thanks goes to Pedro Pombo for his crucial assistance with formatting the text for publication. Finally, I thank Nick Thieberger for the opportunity to publish this volume as a companion to *Language Documentation & Conservation*. The journal's open-access policy ensures that these articles can circulate easily and widely; it is hoped that the insights, warnings and suggestions in these pages will be useful not only to scholars, but also to speakers, language activists and policy-makers alike.

Death by other means: Neo-vernacularization of South Asian languages

E. Annamalai

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Endangerment of a language is assessed by the shrinking number of its speakers and the failure to pass it on to the next generation. This approach views multilingualism in statistical terms. When multilingualism is defined by the functional relationship between languages the meaning of endangerment expands to include functional reduction in languages. This takes place when the economic, political and cultural value of a language comes to near zero. The language may still be spoken inter-generationally, but only for limited in-group communication. Such a language survives, but does not live. This situation can be found even in a language with a large population and official status.

This paper illustrates such a situation with Tamil, a South Asian language. Tamil has a long literary history, is the official language of an Indian state and has political and cultural value. But its lack of economic value makes its speakers consider it a liability in education and for material progress and this restricts it from functioning substantively. Such a language will not die but will become a vernacular. Most Indian regional languages, which were vernaculars in the first millenium when Sanskrit was the dominant language, may become vernaculars again in the third millenium when English is the dominant language.

மெல்லத் தமிழ் இனிச் சாகும் ‘Tamil will die slowly’

Subramanya Bharathi (1882-1921), harbinger of modern Tamil poetry, challenged the above fear about Tamil on failing to acquire new knowledge

1. A FRAMEWORK. Multilingualism is less about the multiplicity of languages and more about the functional relationship between multiple languages. The function of a language is its use in the political, economic and cultural domains at the level of an individual, a community or a country. The functional status of a language accrues from the value attributed differentially to its use in these domains and levels. The resulting index of value is crucial to understand the retention or loss of a language in a multilingual environment.¹ The value index defines the nature of a linguistic ecology which is defined by the functional relationship between languages. The linguistic ecology changes over time because of extralinguistic changes at the macro level, including new contacts with speakers of other languages. These macro level changes may reset the value index, which will define the new ecology.

Let us explore the possible outcomes of functional realignment of languages already in contact, or of realignment due to languages that come newly into contact. With regard to the outcomes of the languages themselves as objects, it is well-attested that the speaker or the community of language X may turn to be X+Y, where Y is either an existing language in the region whose function has changed, or a new language that has come into contact from the in-migration of Y speakers, or the language encountered in the out-migration of X speakers. With regard to the functions of the languages, the functional value F of language X may change, in principle, to F- (indicating reduction in value) or to F+ (indicating elevation in value). The change is relative to X's pre-contact functional value F1. The outcome of both languages retaining their pre-change / pre-contact functional value is of marginal occurrence statistically. So are the outcomes of both languages elevating their functional value to F+ or reducing to F-. The functional value after change / contact (i.e. F2) is determined downward or upward relative to the political, economic and cultural value of the new language in the ecology. When the functional value of a new language is F+, other languages in the ecology may reconfigure their earlier value of F1 to F-. Such functional value reduction with regard to tribal languages is exemplified by

¹ Smolicz (1981) uses the concept of core value restrictively to refer to the valence of cultural value the linguistic community assigns to its language in relation to other markers of its cultural identity. But culture is only one of the domains that assign value to a language in my formulation.

the introduction of Tamil (Y i.e. L2) as a contact language with F+ status in the habitat of tribal communities in the Nilgiris (Tamil Nadu) with their own languages (Gnanasundaram et al. 2012). Functional reduction of the major regional languages of India is illustrated by the growing dominance of English (Y i.e. L2) in India from the time it became the language of the colonial administration, which elevated its political and economic value. One could argue that a prerequisite for multilingual existential stability is to have a balance in the reconfiguration of the functional relationship between the languages in contact whenever the status quo is altered.

1.1. EXPLAINING EXCEPTIONALISM. Defining the stability of a language in terms of its relative functional value makes it possible to envisage a situation in which the contact language (Y i.e. L2) does not have an F+ value high enough (F++) to threaten the very existence of X (i.e. L1) by reducing its value to F0. In such a situation, the chance of maintaining X (i.e. L1), though with F-, is high. This may partially explain the phenomenon of language maintenance in the Indian context. Pandit (1979) observed that the question to be asked about Indian multilingualism is why the languages are maintained, and not why they are lost. In India, historically, migration of people with a different language (L1) into another linguistic area (L2) does not cause L1 to disappear. An example of this is the continued maintenance of Telugu (L1) at home in the state of Tamil Nadu by migrants from another region, Andhra, centuries ago. Telugu is maintained at the functional level of F-, as Tamil was not a language of F++ for the reasons described below. Though this is generally true of the language demography of India with regard to communities and families, there are historical exceptions, especially in indigenous communities and families (Ishtiaq, 1999, Sengupta 2009). Reduction in the number of speakers is generally reported, which lead to ultimate death of these languages in some cases. There is variation in the rate of demographic decline in different parts of the country, which is attributable to many variables (Gnanasundram & Rangan 2006).

Historically, Indian economy remained local and symbiotic, where economic mobility is restricted by the traditional caste and occupation and whose polity was built on the local power structure, which had a distant, tenuous and need-based relationship with the central power structure. The language of the centralized power was distant for the local population and

had to be acquired through formal means. Persian, during the Moghul rule, is an example of this. This arrangement allowed the possibility of all the local languages to share F- value. Such a political situation changed with social reorganization, the spread of education, added transport facilities, increased direct exercise of centralized political power and the emergence of a common market with cash economy. These, separately or in combination, reduced the possibility of maintaining different F- values for the languages of local linguistic communities and increased the possibility of one of them to elevate to the value F++, letting other languages survive with a value of F- . Its consequence could be either to accept further reduction in the F- value of all other languages, or the ultimate reduction of the functional value to F0, which is the total loss of the L1.

The possibility of language loss (i.e. the reduction of its value to F0) increases when the F- language is numerically small and/or is politically and economically weak. This result, however, may be checked by another factor, which is the cultural value of the language tied to the need of ethnic identity and ethnic perpetuation. The language with the largest number of speakers may additionally have a political value in a democratic polity. Such a language, though it is of F- value economically, is capable of organizing politically for resources.

I will argue in this paper that value reduction, not value elimination, is the risk faced in recent years by most of the major languages of India. These are called regional languages, as they are the majority language in a particular region in which they have a history of being the higher order language. They each dominate a region politically, with a state of their own within the Indian Union, and are politically sensitive to their cultural heritage and to their usefulness for political mobilization. I will illustrate this process, which is called in this paper ‘vernacularization’, with one language, viz. Tamil, which has a recorded history of two millennia and plays a crucial role in the identity politics of modern India.

2. THE PAST OF TAMIL. In the India of the first millennium CE, Sanskrit was the language of non-folk literature, philosophical and other epistemological discourse and royal culture and edicts. Prakrits, which are derivatives of Sanskrit and which played roles similar to those of Sanskrit for non-Vedic religions, succumbed to the dominance of Sanskrit as the

cosmopolitan language, but they remained as vernaculars and assumed new identities as languages of a particular region. In south India, the Dravidian languages Telugu and Kannada continued to be vernaculars whether Sanskrit or a Prakrit was the language of literature, religion, knowledge and power. They had their place grounded locally in the communities as languages of agriculture, commerce and crafts. Tamil was an exception, being the language of literature throughout the first millennium and the language of administration of the kings. It was more than a vernacular, which is defined here as a language divorced from material, intellectual and literary power. Tamil was, however, interacting with Sanskrit, which had increasing dominance in these domains, and being influenced by it.

In the second millennium, the vernaculars asserted their power throughout India, for reasons of political dynastic rivalry and popular religious movements positioned against Vedic Hinduism. They began to emerge as autonomous languages, as opposed to derivatives of a dominant language. They created their own literary traditions, grammatical treatises and records (inscriptions) of royal victories, land management, and disputes (Pollock 1998). Their evolutionary path, of course, was not on a straight line. It had upsets whenever political formations changed, but they did finally develop into socially full-fledged languages. However, they did not function in isolation, as they shared linguistic functions with other languages (especially Sanskrit). Each new autonomous language belonged to a contiguous region, though politically divided, and had a shared legacy of written literature, although the majority of the people were non-literate; they constituted a large linguistic community bound by common cultural beliefs, even if divided by castes. Literary works in these languages fostered a linguistic consciousness among their speakers about their literary cultural tradition.

Historically, the relationship of Tamil with Sanskrit was different from that of other regional languages. It was not a relationship of uncontested dominance by Sanskrit but was one of negotiation with it. Tamil became a literate and a literary language two millennia ago. It has had a rich literary, grammatical and religious-philosophical tradition. It was also the language of political governance throughout this period, whether on its own or in partnership with another language such as Prakrit, Marathi or Telugu until the colonial period, when English replaced Tamil in government.

Tamil, however, remained the language of political communication and mobilization of the populace in addition to English which was used by the elite during the period of struggle for independence from the British. Tamil was also the language of education for that segment of the population that had access to general education but not to English education, which was designed to produce the elite required to assist in running the colonial government (Nurullah & Naik 1951).

2.1. POLITICAL ECONOMY. The British, who came in the seventeenth century – towards the end of the second millennium CE –, called the regional languages (including Tamil) ‘vernaculars’ in contrast with the classical languages Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian. They were called vernaculars in the sense that they are languages of the home and the street and used for temporal purposes. The classical languages played a major role in colonial jurisprudence; the vernaculars found a place in the training of the colonial administrative officers working in the field and in the education of masses. Education meant to create a class of elites was in English (Zastoupil & Moir 1999). Though this language hierarchy between English and the vernaculars had negative repercussions for the latter, their educational content was on par with English to include new science and ideas of European Enlightenment and thus went beyond teaching traditional knowledge, skills and values. The colonial linguistic survey of India by Grierson took upon itself the drawing of linguistic boundaries between languages. This helped to extend the linguistic consciousness of the speakers of the vernaculars beyond the cultural arena into the political. National Congress, the political party that was leading the movement for freedom from colonial rule, allowed in 1917 caucuses in the party based on language (Thirumalai 2005). Congress committed itself to redrawing the administrative boundaries of the colonial provinces in independent India, forming states based on language.

The new Constitution of India took cognizance of the political and cultural importance of these vernaculars in a democratic polity and multicultural nation, and designated them for support by the federal government relating to maintaining national unity (Patra 1998). They were called ‘regional languages’, each of which represented a cultural, literary and linguistic region. The first linguistic state was created in 1956 and brought under a single state the speakers of one language living in a

contiguous area but previously under different administrative units. This elevated the language of the majority in the state into the political status of official language of that state. The old vernaculars came to have a larger region, and they stood to gain the patronage and resources of the state for their empowerment and development. These regional languages became the language of legislation and also the language of education by new laws. They thus ceased to be vernaculars and became the dominant language of the state. Unlike English in the colonial period and Sanskrit in the first millennium, the language of power was now a local language spoken by the majority. The combination of demographic strength and political power has potential consequences for the maintenance of the minority languages in a state. A minority language community in the midst of a majority language community will require the majority language for its livelihood needs, be it doing business with the majority community, enjoying its cultural products or making beneficial friendship networks. When the majority language also has political power, competence in the majority language is a prerequisite for accessing public domains that include the government, the school and the court and getting the benefits they offer. The combination of the need for livelihood and of the advantage of increased opportunities for moving up socially and economically makes the majority language a desired asset, and, consequently, strengthens the belief that the minority language is a dispensable liability.

2.2. MARKET ECONOMY. This situation started to change within a generation after India became a Republic in 1950. The policy of economic development anchored on science and technology through higher education was implicitly not confident about the capability of the regional languages to deliver this. This rationalized the policy position to hold on to English until capability was built in the regional languages. Additionally, the planned economy commanded by the State required a bureaucracy for implementing and monitoring economic projects, which inherited English from the structures of the colonial times, as it was the familiar bureaucratic language and it provided internal solidarity to the cadre and cross-regional reach to bureaucrats nationwide. The hold of English over the regional languages in an exponentially growing field of technology and in a globalizing commerce increased enormously during this period. The dominance of

English challenged the newly gained position of the regional languages. I will examine the challenge of English with the example of the Tamil language, which was in a stronger political position after independence, having been the cornerstone of cultural politics in the state of Tamil Nadu.

2.3. THE STRENGTH OF TAMIL. The position of Tamil changed legally and politically in 1956, when the Madras state was formed (renamed as Tamil Nadu in 1968), where Tamil speakers became the absolute majority (90% of the population of the state) and the Tamil language became its official language. Tamil was expected to gradually replace English as the official language of the state. The official language policy was to expedite the switch-over from English to Tamil in public administration and to make Tamil the sole language of instruction in schools, and gradually move it up to higher education. Such policies are enablers of language development, which means that the language will propel itself by its legally and politically sanctioned power and will rise up high above the level of survival. But other factors play a role in this planned outcome in spite of its strengths described below.

Tamil is the first language of about 70 million people around the world. Of these, 61 million live in India, 56 million of which in Tamil Nadu. It is a language with minority status and varying degrees of official recognition and use in Sri Lanka, Singapore and Malaysia. Nevertheless, its demographic strength of about a quarter of Sri Lanka's population was reduced to about 14 per cent as a result of deaths and out-migration caused by the civil war there (De Silva 1998). In Singapore, its survival is threatened in the coming generations (Saravanan 1998). Malaysia is not very different. Tamil survives largely in memory as the ancestral language for ethnic identity in countries such as Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad, Reunion and South Africa, where Tamil speakers were mostly taken as indentured laborers by the colonial companies. By the demographic strength of the first language speakers of Tamil in India (in Tamil Nadu, the former French enclave of Pondicherry and in other states as settlers), it is the fifth largest language, and constituted six percent of the country's population in 2001 (Bhattacharya 2002). It is the second language of about 6.5 percent of the population in south India outside Tamil Nadu (Mallikarjun 2012). The oral language is transmitted across generations as the home language in Tamil Nadu, except in a small

minority of urban families resulting from inter-lingual marriage. It is learned as a language in the majority of schools in Tamil Nadu. It has a vibrant literary production and use in the media, including cinema. Tamil is thus not endangered in any sense in which this linguistic process toward extinction is described (Fishman 2001).

However, the question of the value of Tamil as a living language remains. The value of a language could be symbolic or substantive. It is symbolic when Tamil serves the emotive and existential needs of its speakers, involving cultural identity and security, family and communal solidarity, and celebration of the language as heritage. The symbolic value of Tamil has received the attention of scholars (Ramaswamy 1997, Schiffman 1999) and others.² It is substantive when Tamil serves the instrumental and material needs of the speakers. Tamil has had the symbolic status from the beginning of its history, helping to assert its separateness from Sanskrit, a language in early contact with Tamil which was ritually and epistemologically dominant. This contact influenced in complex ways the development of Tamil and the attitude of its speakers about their language, but it did not lead to the loss of its distinctiveness and use. Acquisition of the knowledge of Sanskrit remained the prerogative of only a few in the foreground of political, religious-philosophical and literary discourse. Tamil remained the language of natural use in economic activities such as agriculture, small industries and trade in agricultural and manufactured goods that included spices, pearls and precious stones. Its material advantage, in other words, was not compromised by the dominance of Sanskrit until the period of British rule.

In the modern period, Tamil nationalism was built politically around the Tamil language and the culture portrayed to be represented by it. One of its manifestations has been the purification of the language by eliminating the presence of Sanskrit at the lexical level (Annamalai 2011). It is an integral part of the construction of a discourse of protection of Tamil from the Other, which could be Sanskrit or its political heir, Hindi. Ordinary people could be passionate about their language to the point of being ready to give their life for its protection (Ramaswamy 1997). The successful political demand

² It is not restricted to Tamil. The role of passion for the mother tongue in the political agitation and formation of the first linguistic state in India is illustrated with another south Indian language, Telugu by Mitchell (1999).

to obtain federal government sanction for the status of Tamil as a classical language on par with Sanskrit in 2004 is an expression of the protection of Tamil's historical status. This can be said to be only a symbolic recognition, when formal learning of Tamil in schools and colleges by the younger generation of Tamil speakers occurs either by a policy mandate or as the last choice of academic subjects to learn.

At the substantive level, Tamil has legal status. It is the language of public administration and its use is stronger at the lower levels of administration, though not at the higher levels. This is true of the judiciary as well as law enforcement. Tamil is the language of legislative deliberations used predominantly on the floor of the house; laws are written in it, though their original version is often written in English and then translated into Tamil. It is the language every student must learn in school, whether public or private, with a few exceptions, though this language is of the high variety far removed from the variety used in daily life and is alienating its learners. It continues to be the language of the agricultural market in which farmers participate, though the outreach programmes of agricultural colleges are embedded in a conceptual framework derived from modern science and in a vocabulary translated from English.

At the cultural level, Tamil is the language of religion used in reciting hymns, in offering prayers, in discoursing religion and in reading religious writings, whether the religion is Hinduism, Christianity or Islam. Tamil is strong in the entertainment industry, whether it is music in audio format, or music and action in video or television programmes and movies. Hindi (not English) comes behind, but way behind; choice of English is restricted to action films, which are also increasingly dubbed into Tamil. The language of sports is a mixture of Tamil and English.

2.4. DEVALUATION OF TAMIL. Tamil is passed on from one generation to another at home and on the street. Even in homes where English is used with children so as to aid in their learning it, the kind of Tamil restricted for in-group communication and media entertainment is still transmitted. The indicators of language endangerment as classically defined (Fishman 2001) are thus absent in the case of Tamil. Yet, it is necessary to bring the situation of languages like Tamil into the discourse of language endangerment for a better understanding of its effect on the nature of multilingualism. It is

generally understood that language endangerment is not just a numerical matter, but an ethical and political matter also pertaining to human choice and dignity. It is also a matter of survival of the earth, whose endangerment may be curbed by the multiple knowledge systems and value systems (values with regard to ecology being just a part of them) codified in the multiplicity of languages (Maffi 2001), most of which are small and bypassed by technological revolutions. This multiplicity of ways of living on this earth and managing it has a better chance to save it than any unifying and unilateral technological solution. Unless manipulated by external socio-political forces, languages develop by responding to the ecological demands placed on them (Mühlhäusler 1996). It follows that their survival is enhanced by their successful ecological adaptation. This philosophy of language and life, however, is not the basis of the symbolic value attached to their language by the Tamil speakers. It is more political and emotive.

Of the three dimensions of language ecology, viz. cultural, political and economic, the last one is increasingly homogenized through the use of globally converging market and technology. The language with which the information communication technology grew has the power of replacing other languages. With this fast changing and quickly spreading technology, other languages do not get adaptation time and their survival comes under threat. Moreover, this is the second time in history a technology has come to be closely knitted with a language; as the invention of writing technology was knitted with languages in one way (unlike wheel technology or combustion engine, for example), information communication technology is knitted with English in another way. This hinders, if not prevents, ecological adaptation to this technology by minor languages.

Language endangerment is not merely about individual languages, but about the relationship between languages. It is not just the relationship between the dying languages and the others, but between the languages that are living. When the functional relationship is heavily loaded in favour of one language over another or of some languages over many, the structure of multilingualism becomes less sustainable, not only on ethical and political grounds but also on the grounds of economy. Language endangerment includes endangerment to multilingualism in this non-statistical sense. It is true that all languages are not equal functionally, just like all guns are not equal in their lethal power. But the languages are equal in their right to

live and flourish so that their speakers enjoy the equal rights of all human beings. The right to one's cultural life is as significant (and inalienable) as the right to one's physical life (Skutnabb-Kangas 2012).

It is in this sense of an imbalance in which all the functional load is staked on one or a few languages (Annamalai 2003) that multilingualism is endangered. Let us see the situation of Tamil and similar non-minor languages with regard to functional deprivation without loss of their demographic, even political, strength. The modern borderless economy driven by virtual digital technology and fed by monetization of knowledge is not conducive to a multiplicity of knowledge systems, and so to a multiplicity of languages. Education is the means to produce workers for this economy, and the most advantageous language at the work place becomes the language of education. English scores high as the advantageous language in the contemporary economy. The reward system for skills and knowledge in this economy is linguistically skewed in favour of getting them through English. People attribute the rewards to this particular language through which the skills and knowledge are imparted rather than to the skills and knowledge *per se*. Language and content become isomorphic; English comes to be equated with knowledge. People want to acquire this language at the cost of everything else, including their inherited language. Any non-participating language in this homogenizing economy is considered a liability, and this downsizes its non-economic – cultural and political – value also.

Tamil is considered a liability by its speakers in the contemporary world, particularly by those in the middle class and those aspiring to be there. The population of the middle class is on the increase in the new economy, which is freed not only from its commanding control by the state but also from cultural variation in economic activity. The sense of liability of Tamil is strongest when it comes to choosing a medium of instruction, in favour of English. When the medium of instruction from grade one in school is not the language of mediation with the world from infancy, learning becomes less creative and productive, and less beneficial in learning the second language used as the medium (Cummins 2009). The child makes a dichotomy of languages used as learning tools, one for school subjects and another for ordinary life (Krishna Kumar 1996). The language for the former is for cognitive tasks and the latter for emotional needs. This dichotomy creates a barrier for the mother tongue to develop for academic-cognitive purposes.

This not only reinforces the sense of liability, but discourages the mother tongue from performing its intellectual function. Lack of intellectual value is a step towards vernacularizing a language. Tamil is moving in this direction: the use of Tamil in academic-intellectual debates and output of such debates is minimal.

Learning of Tamil as a language in schools and colleges is perfunctory for the children of middle class parents. They learn it because it is mandatory and necessary for passing the examination. A consequence of this is that reading of Tamil outside the class for cultural understanding and enrichment is minimal. Reading is limited to passing time and getting mundane information. These people, who will be culturally semi-literate as to the world view articulated by their mother tongue, are not numerically large, but they will constitute the elite of the Tamil society by their economic power through higher education. They will be responsible for conferring on Tamil the status of a vernacular in contrast with cosmopolitan English. This will be a situation similar to the one that obtained in colonial times.

There are other consequences of vernacularization that have a bearing on the form of Tamil. The registers of the Tamil language are getting reduced to those relating to in-group communication, entertainment and day to day politics. The development of registers for speaking of hard and soft sciences, issues that shape the perceptions of modern life, more generally the deliberations of intellectual pursuits, is stunted. Any attempt to use Tamil for these purposes is in a register which is extensively mixed with English, in which the ability of Tamil to code new ideas is compromised. This prevents the emergence of a linguistic conceptual apparatus in Tamil to make it a language with added functional value. There are, of course, translations of new knowledge from English into Tamil. But they remain outside active and natural use in Tamil, since learning of new knowledge through formal education is done through English. Tamil remains thus sterile to conceptual and discourse elaboration. The elite perceive no need to energize Tamil in this regard, and accept an F- value for it.

This is by no means a threat to the survival of the Tamil language, but it is a threat to its functioning as a language capable of serving the needs of their speakers to live in the modern world. It will shrink to become a vernacular fit only to link their speakers to their heritage and to their kinship network. It will encourage the speakers to be linguistically literate in Tamil,

but culturally semi-literate. This state of the language will make it morbid, living on the life-support mechanisms of allocating state resources to maintain its symbolic status, and of providing statutory status for mandatory, but perfunctory, use in some public domains. Tamil, in its journey from a classical language to a modern language, seems to be choosing the path of becoming a vernacular again in the new linguistic ecology of Tamil Nadu.

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Majority language death

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The notion of ‘language death’ is usually associated with one of the ‘endangered languages’, i.e. languages that are at risk of falling out of use as their speakers die out or shift to some other language. This paper describes another kind of language death: the situation in which a language remains a powerful identity marker and the mother tongue of a country’s privileged and numerically dominant group with all the features that are treated as constituting ethnicity, and yet ceases to be used as a means of expressing its speakers’ intellectual demands and preserving the community’s cultural traditions. This process may be defined as the ‘intellectual death’ of a language.

The focal point of the analysis undertaken is the sociolinguistic status of Punjabi in Pakistan. The aim of the paper is to explore the historical, economic, political, cultural and psychological reasons for the gradual removal of a majority language from the repertoires of native speakers.

1. PREFACE. The Punjabi-speaking community constitutes 44.15% of the total population of Pakistan and 47.56% of its urban population.¹

¹ Pakistan is a multilingual country with six major languages and over fifty-nine smaller languages. The major languages are Punjabi (44.15% of the population), Pashto (15.42%), Sindhi (14.10%), Siraiki (10.53%), Urdu (7.57%) and Balochi (3.57%). Speakers of other languages account for 4.66% of the population; this category congregates over fifty languages, some of them on the verge of extinction (Census of Pakistan 2001, Table 2.7:

Together with speakers of Saraiki² (10.53%), which is treated by some linguists as a southern dialect of Punjabi (Nadiem 2005),³ bearers of the Punjabi language represent the majority of the population of Pakistan. Even if Saraiki is excluded, Punjabi has the largest number of speakers in Pakistan: Pashto, with 15.42% of the speakers, and Sindhi, with 11.77%, occupy a distant second and third place. Urdu, the national language of the country, is the mother tongue of only 7.57% of the entire population of Pakistan.⁴

The Punjabi community has all the features that are usually taken to constitute ethnicity: a shared territory, history, geography, and cultural roots. The basis of the people's cultural heritage is their common language. The earliest poetic treatises produced in Western Punjabi date back to the 15th century, and the earliest available prose works are the *Janam Sakhis* – hagiographic stories of the life and teachings of the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak (1469-1539) –, from the 17th century (McLeod 1980). They were popular mostly with the Sikh community, while Farid's poetry, folk songs and *Qissa* stories constituted the common heritage of the three main religious communities of the Punjab – Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims.⁵

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² Saraiki is spelled also as Siraiki and Seraiki. Saraiki is the spelling used in universities in Pakistan.

³ Punjabi and Saraiki are mutually intelligible, differing in their consonant inventory and in the structure of the verb. As there are no clear-cut criteria for differentiating language and dialect, these problems must be solved on the basis of speakers' self-identification.

⁴ Source: the Government of Pakistan, Statistics Division/Ministry of Economic Affairs and Statistics [http://www.statpak.gov.pk/depts/pco/statistics/other_tables/pop_by_mother_tongue.pdf]. These statistics, based on a census conducted in 1998, have been challenged by many scholars and rejected by many politicians who claimed that a certain amount of educated urban speakers of Punjabi identified themselves as Urdu speakers (e.g. Mansoor 1993). The results of the 2008 census have not yet been disclosed.

⁵ There are controversies among scholars concerning the earliest traces of the Punjabi language. (Gopal Singh 1979). The verses by Sheikh Farid found in the *Adi Granth* are usually considered to constitute a clear link in the descent of modern Punjabi from the Multani dialect (Sekhon & Duggal 1992). Some scholars ascribe 'Shloke Shaikh Farid ke' incorporated into the *Adi Granth* to Farid-ud-din Ganj-i-Shakar (1173-1265), others attribute them to Farid Sani, the spiritual descendent of Ganj-i-Shakar. There is no unanimity over the lifetime of Farid Sani as well. Sometimes it is dated from 1450 to 1554, sometimes from 1450 to 1575. Some scholars argue that the ideas expressed by the author of 'Shloke Shaikh Farid ke' betray the first phase of influence of Vaishnava Vedantic Bhakti (i.e. a period which begins from the middle of the 15th century. (Sharda 1974: 107). In addition,

In today's Pakistan, the Punjabi-speaking community is anything but a disadvantaged ethnic group. The influential class of rich Punjabi landlords, the largest educated middle class which provides most of the personnel for white-collar professions and is the pool for recruitment into civil and military service – all that makes the general public as well as political analysts regard Punjabis as a privileged group.

However, the mother tongue of this privileged and numerically dominant group has no institutional support in Pakistan. All cultural, intellectual or professional activity of the community takes place either in Urdu or in English. There are 36,750 Sindhi-medium schools in Sind and 10,731 Pashto-medium schools in the Northwestern Province, and both languages are also taught as compulsory subjects in these two provinces (Rahman 2002a: 515-524). However, there is not a single Punjabi-medium school, and Punjabi is nowhere taught as a compulsory subject. With the exception of several Punjabi films and short TV or radio programs, Punjabi is almost absent from the mass media, and completely absent from government services. One can do an M.A. or a Ph.D. in the University of the Punjab in Lahore, but it can hardly serve the cause of preserving the Punjabi language. People may watch a film in Punjabi, but they do not read Punjabi written texts, because they are only used to speaking and listening to Punjabi, not to reading it. Very few people would read a book or a newspaper in their 'mother tongue', because they have not got used to it in school. As a result, Punjabi-speaking poets and writers have to write in Urdu for Punjabi-speaking readers if they want their books to sell.

Of all the languages listed in censuses, only the figures for Punjabi speakers have decreased from 48.17% in 1981 to 44.15% in 1998. This decline cannot be explained by a drop in the Siraiki or Punjabi population (which did not occur) nor by the mass migration of Punjabis to other places. The reason might be that a number of Punjabis identified themselves in the 1998 census as speakers of Urdu. The sociological research undertaken by Mansoor (1993) and Rahman (2002a) in Lahore partially confirms this supposition, as a significant number of Punjabi students identified

there is vivid Kabir's influence on Baba Farid's compositions. As Kabir's lifetime is dated between 1398 and 1520, it seems most reasonable to attribute Sheikh Farid's poetry to the period from 1450 to 1554.

themselves as speakers of Urdu. They felt embarrassed to call themselves ‘Punjabi speakers’ as – according to them – the only topics suitable for Punjabi were gossip, swearing and jokes.

Why do Punjabis not support their own language? An attempt is made below to adduce historical, economic, political, cultural and psychological explanations for this phenomenon.

2. THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC STATUS OF PUNJABI FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE. Punjabi did not have any official status in the Mughal Empire. Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780 – 1839), the founder of the first Sikh Empire which lasted from 1799 to 1849, patronized Punjabi, but Persian remained the language of the court. It is worth mentioning that literacy (and, consequently, the number of people who had good command of the Persian language) was far more widespread in the Sikh kingdom than in other provinces. Before the British conquest of the Punjab in 1849, there were 300,000 pupils in indigenous schools, whereas in 1860-61 these numbers had come down to 60,168 pupils (Leitner 1882:16). There were both Persian and Arabic schools. Since Persian was the language of the government, bureaucracy, judiciary, education, etc., it was necessary to learn it in order to function as a *munshi* (clerk), a *muallim* (teacher), and generally as any state functionary (Rahman 2003: 2).

In 1849, the Punjab had passed into the hands of the British East India Company and later became a province of the British Empire in India. The Department of Public Instruction created by British rulers in 1855 retained Persian as the language of written documentation. Persian was later replaced with Urdu, the informal lingua franca of North India. In the Punjab, Urdu was accepted by the British rulers as the vernacular language after consulting the officers posted in the districts of the new provinces. Urdu became the medium of instruction in government schools attended by the working class, lower-middle and middle class children. Urdu was also the language of administration and of the lower-level judicial bodies, printing press and the army (Rahman 2011). Interestingly, in 1860 a medical course in Urdu was instituted in the Lahore Medical College (Rahman 2004: 22).⁶

The court *munshis* and the school teachers brought largely from the

⁶ The name was later changed to *Lahore Medical School*.

United Provinces⁷ were promoters of Urdu in the Punjab and, due to their efforts, the language spread quickly.⁸ In the province of Sindh, however, Sindhi was also used, but not in competition with Urdu (Rahman 2002a: 210-218). The language which really competed with Urdu and gradually gained power in British India was Hindi. In 1890-1891, the ratio of subscribers of Urdu and Hindi newspapers was 2:1 (16256: 8002); by 1936, it was the opposite, 1:2 (182485: 324880). From 1891 to 1936, the amount of subscribers of Urdu newspapers increased 9-fold, while the amount of subscribers of Hindi newspapers increased 40.5 times (Bhatnagar 1947:153, 368-369). Similar ratios characterize book publications: in 1889-1890, there were 561 (61.2%) books published in Urdu and 361 (38.8%) books in Hindi. In 1935-1936, the number of Urdu books was 252 (10.9%), which constituted a 2.2-fold decrease, while the Hindi books amounted to 2139 (89.15), a 6-fold increase (Chatterji 1960: 248).

However, during the British period, there was a lot of official patronage for Urdu, first and foremost in the domain of employment. Because of this, and despite the efforts of Hindi activists, Urdu was predominant (Rahman 2011). English became the language of the upper judiciary and part of the educational system and administration. Upper class children attended English-medium institutions in order to later occupy high social positions in society. In fact, the British substituted Persian with English (Rahman 1996a: 22-38). In 1857, the British colonial administration started university education with the intention to give Indians a sense of participation in running the affairs of the state and create an educated elite loyal to the British government (Basu 1952: 303). All higher education in colleges and universities was in English. The spread of English caused the arrival of more newcomers from Bengal (Gopal Singh 1979: 587).

Education in English brought new ideas of democracy, human rights, individualism, etc. These new concepts quickly spread among the recently-formed professional middle class. The press played an important role in informing and leading the public opinion. One might expect that the

⁷ The United Provinces were a province of British India which corresponded approximately to the combined regions of the present-day Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

⁸ The educated elite of the Punjab was already acquainted with the Arabic script and borrowings from Persian and Arabic.

propagation of new methods of social organization would result in the national consolidation of Punjabi identity along secular politico-economic lines, but instead such consolidation had a religious basis.

It should be noted that, rather paradoxically, democratic reforms in India have only strengthened the division of the population on communal grounds. Through the Minto-Morley Reform of 1909, the British rulers enlarged the sphere of Indian participation in the Government. As a result, the various communities started competing in order to increase their representation in central and local administrative bodies. When Muslims acquired their separate electorates, the Sikhs immediately began to demand similar rights and, as their demands did not meet with success, agitation campaigns were organized.

It is not the case that the three main religious communities of the Punjab have always been hostile to each other but, under British rule, political life in the region was predominantly organized along religious lines. One important reason for this is that, as is well known, the British pursued communal policies, supporting different religious communities at different times (Gopal Singh 1979: 585-693). After the mutiny of 1857, Muslims were deprived of their power and position. Their traditional positions as land, civil and military servants were no longer available to them. Civil services were monopolized by Hindus, in most cases outsiders (the educated Hindus of Bengal and Madras). Military service became a privilege of the Sikhs, whom the British Government supported as a religious community. The British Governor-General decreed that all Sikhs entering the British army should receive the *Pahul* (a special ceremony of purification) and observe strictly the code of Sikh conduct. The Governor-General also encouraged the translation of the Sikh scripture (*Guru Granth Sahib*) into English. This work was supposed to be carried at Government expense and in consultation with the Sikh authorities.

However, by the beginning of the 20th century, British sympathies started to change. Various strata of Hindu and Sikh society were dissatisfied with British rule. Commercial classes resented the competition of the West in both their internal and external trade, and intellectuals demanded more liberties. As Hindus mostly took the lead in Home Rule agitations as well as in artistic, spiritual and educational movements, the British decided to abandon their distrust of the Muslims and encourage them to oppose the

growing Hindu national movement. British good-will for the Sikhs also changed around 1905. The foundation of the anti-British Gadar party, in 1913, made the British Government even more suspicious of the Sikh community. Having transferred their allegiance to the Muslims, the British supported the formation of their own political platform, the All-India Muslim League in 1906.

In the Punjab itself, the British also pursued communal policies: started in 1887, they supported the Muslim-majority West Punjab, in whose prosperity the Sikh Jats participated only as migrants, and neglected the famine-ridden East Punjab, where Hindus and Sikhs predominated (Gopal Singh 1979: 632-633).

In this context, in 1873, the Sikhs launched the *Singh Sabha* reform movement from Amritsar. Initially, its social basis consisted of big landlords, who were later joined by students and intellectuals; all of them were inspired by the idea that strict measures should urgently be taken to protect the Sikh faith. Branches of the Singh Sabha were created in different parts of the Punjab, and very soon two main groups emerged: supporters of the Amritsar Sabha came to be known as the 'Traditional Khalsa' (*Sanatan Khalsa*), and the more radical group, initially based in Lahore, acquired the name of 'True Khalsa' (*Tat Khalsa*). The conservative Sanatan Sikhs considered the Sikhs and their traditions as part of the wider Hindu world, while their opponents, the followers of the Tat Khalsa, were of the opinion that Sikhs should be treated as an entirely different community from the Hindus. The main ideas of Tat Khalsa Sikhs were perfectly expressed by Kahn Singh Nabha in his booklet *Ham Hindu nahin* 'We are not Hindus', published in 1899 (Singh 1979: 620). The author insisted on a separate Sikh identity and wrote that Sikhs should never observe castes or visit the shrines belonging to followers of other religions, and that they should abstain from practicing non-Sikh rituals. At the beginning of the 20th century, famous Sikh writers and reformists such as Bhai Vir Singh, Bhai Jodh Singh (among others) spoke of the Sikhs as a *qaum* 'nation'.

Reformist Hindu movements were not only trying to defend their religion by drawing demarcation lines between different religious communities, they also organized campaigns against Muslims. The *Arya Samaj* campaigned in 1875 for *Shudhi* (re-conversion of Muslims), for a ban on cow-slaughter, etc. .

Language played a very significant role in religious (rather than ethnic) self-identification of the population of North India, including the Punjab. During Mughal and Maharaja Ranjit Singh's time, the main authors of prose and poetry which attained popularity among all three religious communities were Muslim: Waris Shah (1706-1798), Hafiz Barkhudar (1658-1707), Hashim Shah (1735?-1843?), Qadaryar (1802-1892), to name only a few. British education introduced new European genres and, predominantly, Sikh and Hindu authors: Nanak Singh (1897-1971), Puran Singh (1881-1931), Dhani Ram Chatrik (1876-1957), Diwan Singh (1897-1944), Mohan Singh (1905-1978), among others. Unlike *qissa* stories, known to common people of all religious communities, modern Punjabi literature was read by educated speakers of the Punjabi language, predominantly Sikhs and, to a lesser extent Hindus.

The idea that Urdu was the language of Muslims, Hindi belonged to Hindus and Punjabi to Sikhs was gradually becoming established in society. The islamization of Urdu which took place in the 18th and 19th centuries has been very well described by Tariq Rahman (2006a, 2011: ch. 5, 6). At the turn of the century, Urdu became a symbol of Muslim identity, propagated by the Pakistan movement.

Religious differentiation existed within the Urdu language as well. T. Khalmurzayev divides Urdu press into 'Punjabi' and 'Muslim'. Many publishers of Urdu newspapers in the British Punjab were Sikhs and Hindus who supported *Arya samaj* – a religious reformist society which campaigned for the revival of Hinduism and the development of Hindi. The readers of 'Punjabi'-style Urdu newspapers were Sikhs and Hindus. They preferred to read Urdu newspapers as they learned Urdu in school, but preferred to read about Hindu or Sikh issues, Sikh and Hindu holidays, rituals, etc. These newspapers used plenty of Sanskrit borrowings, in contradistinction with the 'Muslim' newspapers (published by Muslims for Muslims), which resorted to Persian and Arabic borrowings. These 'Muslim' Urdu newspapers were mainly published outside the Punjab and, despite their very wide geographical distribution, had much in common in terms of style, vocabulary, topics, etc. (Khalmurzayev 1979: 57-65).

As for Punjabi, it became a symbol of Sikh identity. It was through the efforts of Prof. Gurmukh Singh, a Lahore-based *Singh Sabha* activist, that teaching of Punjabi was introduced at the Oriental College of Lahore, in

1877 (Gopal Singh 1979: 610).

The notion of script as a religious symbol was not as important at that time as it is nowadays. Since the time of Khalif Umar, the educational policy of the Muslims towards their conquered lands did not place any obstacles in the way of Muslim settlers and converts using local languages, provided that these were written in the Arabic script. This script was employed by all communities to write both Urdu and Punjabi, whereas the Gurmukhi was used mostly by Sikhs (Sekhon & Duggal 1992). The idea that Punjabi should be written in Gurmukhi, Hindi in Devanagari and Urdu in the Arabic script is a later development.

Punjabi Sikhs usually believe in the sacred qualities of the Gurmukhi script introduced by the second Sikh Guru Angad Dev (1504-1552). However, some modern Sikh scholars argue that Gurmukhi existed long before the lifetime of the founder of Sikhism Guru Nanak (1469-1539) and could be used by Hindus for writing in Punjabi. This is proven by the fact that Guru Nanak wrote an acrostic called the *patti* or tablet in Rag Asa, in which he used all of the thirty five letters of the Gurmukhi script with the same sound values as they have nowadays (Sekhon & Duggal 1992).

Interestingly, the Gurmukhi type was first manufactured by Christian missionaries, and the first Punjabi work printed in the Gurmukhi script was the Christian Bible published at Sirampur and presented to Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1835. The first grammar of Punjabi and the first English-Punjabi dictionary were also prepared by Christian missionaries (Gopal Singh 1979: 607).

Divided into three religious communities, all Punjabis spoke one and the same language – Punjabi – even though, for a long time, it did not have any official status. Punjabi acquired the status of a state language (alongside Urdu) for the first time in its history in 1911, in the princely state of Patiala. By decree of the Maharaja of Patiala, teaching of Punjabi was made compulsory at primary and secondary state schools from 1942. The following landmark was the declaration of Punjabi as the court language of the then PEPSU state, in 1948.⁹

⁹ The Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU) was created out of the merger of several Punjabi princely states on July 15, 1948, formally becoming a state of India in 1950. The capital and principal city was Patiala, and the last Maharaja of Patiala, Yadvindra Singh, served as *Rajpramukh* (equivalent to Governor) of the state during its

3. PUNJABI IN INDEPENDENT INDIA. At the time of Partition (in June 1947) there were attempts to seek the support of Gandhi for a Punjabi-speaking state in India carved out of what was soon going to be East Punjab. The first sharp reaction of Gandhi was negative, as he suspected the desire to form a Sikh state. When told that no single community will form the majority in this state (the Muslims had not yet migrated to Pakistan), he calmed down and agreed to discuss the proposal. But this offer was never taken up by the Sikhs with any seriousness. It was soon made impracticable due to riots and the wholesale migration of the minorities from both parts of the Punjab, as well as the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a Hindu fanatic on January 30, 1948. Punjabi was nonetheless included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India and came to be recognized as one of the fifteen official languages of the country. However, the controversy concerning the status of Punjabi in Punjab was to persist until the creation of a separate Punjabi state – Punjabi Suba – in 1966.¹⁰

The place of Hindi and Punjabi in educational institutions was governed by a formula developed by the former Chief Minister Bhimsen Sachar in 1949 and named after him. According to this formula, Hindi-medium and Punjabi-medium instruction should be provided at the primary level even if only one out of four students in a class requested it. In addition, there should be compulsory teaching of either Hindi or Punjabi, and another language should be an optional non-qualifying subject for examination purposes (Sharma 1995: 294). However, the choice of the medium of instruction was left to the parents, allowing Hindus to opt for Hindi and Sikhs for Punjabi. This divided the two communities further apart. Even the academic world got divided on communal lines. In 1949, The Punjab University, dominated by *Arya Samaj* elements, decided that Punjabi was not an appropriate medium of instruction, even if the Sikhs would (as they did) agree to both the Nagri

short existence. On November 1, 1956, PEPSU was merged into the state of Punjab. Part of the former state of PEPSU presently lies within the state of Haryana, which was separated from the Punjab on November 1, 1966.

¹⁰ Demands for Punjabi Suba were accepted by the central government in September 1966, when the former large state of Punjab was divided into three: areas in the south of the Punjab formed the new state of Haryana, the northern Pahari- and Kangri-speaking districts were merged with Himachal Pradesh, while the remaining areas formed the new Punjabi-speaking state, which retained the name of Punjab. As a result, Sikhs became the majority of the newly created state.

and Gurmukhi scripts. The Punjab became a linguistic battleground. In fact, the fight was communal on both sides. The main Sikh party, *Akali Dal*, took little interest in the development of the Punjabi language. This statement may be seen in the fact that none of the Sikh scholars who really contributed to enriching Sikh literature (such as Bhai Vir Singh, Bhai Jodh Singh, Prof. Teja Singh, etc.) were ever nominated to the S.G.P.C.¹¹

After much agitation promoted by the Akali Dal, a compromise called the “Regional formula” was finally accepted by all parties in 1956. The Punjab was divided into two regions – Punjabi-speaking and Hindi-speaking. Punjabi became the sole medium in the Punjabi region and was to be taught in the Hindi region as well (and vice-versa). However, the Hindus never opted for it.

No Census ever shows linguistic reality, it shows people’s self-identification. The 1961 Census was remarkable for the religious, rather than ethnic, trends of self-identification among the population of the Indian Punjab. Contrary to actual practice, in this census the Sikhs stated *en masse* that their mother tongue was Punjabi, while the Hindus usually insisted on Hindi.

The Central Government could not agree to form a linguistic state in the Punjab because of strong Hindu opposition. J. L. Nehru wrote in 1961 to Fateh Singh:

It is not out of any discrimination against the Punjab or distrust of the Sikhs that the process of forming a linguistic state was not possible. ... Punjabi was essentially the dominant language of the Punjab state, common to both Hindus and Sikhs, though it is not possible to accept the principle of purely linguistic states in the case of Punjab. (quoted from Gopal Singh 1979: 727)

It was only on March 2, 1966 that the Congress Working Committee passed a resolution about the division of the existing state of Punjab to form a new state with Punjabi as the state language. However, this division did

¹¹ S.G.P.C. (the *Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee*) is an organization responsible for the upkeep of gurdwaras, Sikh places of worship, in the states of Punjab, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. The S.G.P.C. also administers the Golden temple in Amritsar. S.G.P.C. officials are elected in open conclaves held in Amritsar, in which all Sikhs may participate.

not demarcate the Punjabi-speaking areas from the Hindi-speaking ones; it only demarcated the Sikh-majority areas from the Hindu-populated lands.

The Punjab (State) Language Act 1967 declared Punjabi in Gurmukhi script the sole official language of the new Punjab State at all levels. Punjabi came to be accepted as a medium of instruction in schools and colleges. It was allowed as an alternative medium of examination for certain subjects at the post-graduate level (Gopal Singh 1979: 713-735).

4. PUNJABI IN INDEPENDENT PAKISTAN. Pakistan was created according to the basic principle of its founders: ‘one nation, one religion, one language, one state’ (Zaidi 2010: 3). When it was formed, Pakistan was divided into two separate parts: West Pakistan and East Pakistan. The population of West Pakistan was comprised of several large ethnic groups: Punjabis (67.08%), Sindhis (12.85%), Pathans (Pashto speakers: 8.16%), Mohajirs (Urdu speakers: 7.05%), Balochis (3.04%) and diverse ethno-linguistic groups of the Northern Areas (Kazi 1987). East Pakistan was mainly populated by Bengalis, who constituted the majority not only there but in the newly-born country as a whole, where they accounted for 55.6% of the population (Census of Pakistan 1951: Census Bulletin No. 1).

According to the democratic principle of the majority, Bengali should have been the main candidate to become the national/official language. However, in November 1947, the government of Pakistan declared Urdu the national language of the whole of Pakistan.¹² Urdu was not the mother tongue of any indigenous ethnic group of Pakistan, but that of the Mohajirs¹³ who had migrated to West Pakistan from India during the Partition and settled in the urban centers of the province of Sind. Many of those immigrants were leading politicians and advocates of Urdu as an ‘Islamic language’ destined to weld different ethno-linguistic groups of Pakistan into one nation. The other advantage of Urdu over the mother tongues of the numerous ethno-linguistic groups of the country was that, as the mother tongue of a small group of migrants, it would not place any large ethnic group in a privileged position. In addition, it had been an official language of British India, and the population had grown accustomed to it.

The attitude of the two largest ethnic groups of Pakistan towards the

¹² About parliament discussions on that matter see Rahman (1996a: 86).

¹³ The meaning of the term *mohajir* is ‘an emigrant/migrant’.

national language problem was absolutely different. The Bengalis, united by their common language and culture (Bartkus 1999: 125) launched a campaign against Urdu, but the government suppressed it.¹⁴ The suppression of the Bengali language caused in its speakers a feeling of economic and political deprivation which culminated in the separation of the Bengali part of the country and the formation of the state of Bangladesh in 1971 (Islam 2003; Umar 2004). However, the main reason for the opposition to Urdu was not merely linguistic or even cultural, but economic. Bengalis did not wish to see revenues from the Eastern wing, primarily from the export of jute and other products, spent for the development of West Pakistan or the army which, as it turns out, was West Pakistani- (or, rather, Punjabi-) dominated (Jahan 1972; HBWI 1982, vol. 6: 810-811; Rahman 2006b: 73-104).

Besides, if Urdu, and not Bengali, were used in the lower domains of power such as administration, the judiciary, education, media, or the military, the Bengalis, who were primarily civil servants, would have been deprived of their share in power both in the centre and in their own province, because the most powerful jobs would have been controlled by West Pakistani bureaucrats and the military. The Bengali language became a symbol of a consolidated Bengali identity. Details of the Bengali language movement are given in Alavi (1988), Rahman (1995, 1996a, 2002a, 2006b), to name only a few, and are beyond the scope of this paper.

Sind was another region where Urdu (the language of Mohajirs) faced serious opposition from local bureaucrats and intellectuals, supported by an substantial part of the urban population. The language riots of January 1971 and July 1972 in Sind are described in Ahmed (1992).

Balochi and Brahvi in Balochistan, Pashto in the N.W.F.P and Siraiki in South Western Punjab remained symbols of ethnic self-identification, but Urdu did not meet with much opposition in these regions (Rahman 1996a).

While speakers of Punjabi formed a coalition with the Mohajirs and actively supported Urdu as a symbol of national unity, it would be wrong to say that all the Punjabis were ready to support Urdu at the cost of their own

¹⁴ On February 21, 1952, several people were killed during protests to gain the recognition of Bengali as a state language for the then Dominion of Pakistan and to maintain the Bengali script. Since then, this day has been observed in Bangladesh as the Language Movement Day and, on November 17, 1999, it was proclaimed International Mother Language Day by UNESCO.

language. The role of Urdu as a symbol of religious, political and cultural unity was propagated first of all by the ruling elite, which consisted of feudal lords, ruling party politicians, bureaucrats, and military officers. They were opposed by middle class intellectuals who insisted on linguistic and democratic rights for themselves and for other ethno-linguistic communities of Pakistan.

Established in 1951 the Pak Punjabi League demanded that Punjabi be taught at schools and universities from primary to M.A. level. But, despite their protests, Punjabi was only allowed as an optional subject at the postgraduate level in the Punjab University. From time to time, pro-Punjabi organizations such as the Punjabi Majlis and the Punjabi Group of Writers intensively campaigned for the use of Punjabi in schools and in government services (Rahman 1996a). There were other individual and collective campaigns organized by intellectuals and politicians in support of Punjabi (Zaidi 2010: 1-34), but no serious large-scale ethnic movements of Punjabis (the majority of the country's population), to back the protesters in their attempts to widen the social functions of their mother tongue.

In addition to the above described historical reasons for the prominence of Urdu – the primacy of religious self-identification and the specific sociolinguistic situation in British India, when Urdu and English were the official languages and Punjabi was restricted to non-official spheres –, there were also evident political reasons:

- 1) At the time of the creation of Pakistan, Bengalis made up more than half (55.6%) of the country's population and, in reaction to this, the Punjabi-Mohajir elite pinned their hopes on Urdu as a unifying symbol of the state (Rahman 2002: 263). However, after Bangladesh seceded and Punjabis became the largest ethno-linguistic group in Pakistan, the attitude of the Punjabi elite towards its mother tongue did not change. One of the explanations given by the ruling Punjabi-Mohajir coalition was that, if they were to support Punjabi, the other provinces might also demand their linguistic rights, which was completely undesirable (Rahman 2002a).¹⁵ Using the slogan of Islam and Pakistani nationalism to prevent such movements in the country, Punjabi rulers and Mohajirs

¹⁵ It is worth mentioning in this respect that Sindhi and Pashto are taught in schools, while the Punjabi language is not.

did not consider that what was promoted might not necessarily produce cohesiveness but resentment against the Punjabi-dominated centre (Rahman 2004: 4);

2) In the course of Pakistan's modern history, any kind of internal opposition was suppressed in the name of Islam and national security (Mehdi 1994). When martial law was imposed by General Ayub in 1958 and by General Zia (ethnic Punjabi) in 1977, the government and state-controlled media presented the leaders of any indigenous language movement as anti-state criminals (Afzal 1986), any newly-created literary organization was proclaimed a 'political party' and immediately banned (Ayres 2003; Shackle 2007). It was only during the more or less democratic rule of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1972-77) that the so-called 'anti-state' Punjabi intellectuals were allowed to teach Punjabi in the Punjab University and that Punjabi functions and cultural programs began to be encouraged.

The discrimination of the major language of Pakistan may also be explained by cultural reasons: the term 'culture' in Pakistan has always meant 'Islamic culture' (Rahman 1999). Teaching of Punjabi has been Islamized to the extent that the Punjabi Literature course at the Punjab University has turned into Islamic Studies in the Punjabi language. No reference is ever made in class to the ancient Harappan civilization, to the ancient Gandhara state or to the ancient university in Taxila, which was the first of its kind in the world (Zaidi 2010). Young people can only access the best of Punjabi cultural heritage within their families and through oral transmission. Most non-Muslim authors who write in Punjabi – such as, for example, the famous poet Shīv Kumār Batālvī – are virtually unknown to young Punjabis in Pakistan. As a result, young people from families which do not preserve common Punjabi cultural traditions consider Punjabi to be a language worth for nothing except gossiping, making jokes and swearing (see the above-mentioned sociological research of Mansoor (1993) and Rahman (2002a)).

One of the main reasons for the low esteem of the Punjabi language is – paradoxical though it may seem – the high economic and political status of the Punjabi community in today's Pakistan. Language movements in modern South Asia are absolutely different from what

occurred in seemingly parallel historical processes of national development in Europe. In almost every European country, the rising bourgeoisie made efforts to standardize and promote its mother tongue, to convert it into the main means of communication at all levels and, through this, to make its use one of the most important tools of nation building. The modern epoch of globalization created a new tendency in such processes: nowadays, ethnic groups usually start language movements when they feel economically and/or politically and/or culturally depressed, in the hope of gaining some privileges as a result of those campaigns. Very often, the main impulse is the desire of the 'sons of the soil' to secure more job opportunities in comparison with the migrants.

Those were important incentives for the Dogri, Rajasthani and Maithili movements in India as well as for the Saraiki movement in Pakistan. The Saraiki movement started in the 1960s, with the aim to establish a collective identity for the Saraiki language group inside the Punjab Province of Pakistan and to secure official status for the language. However, the real reasons for the movement were different: the underdevelopment of the Southern Punjab and the desire of the 'sons of the soil' to improve their economic and political status. The latter becomes clear from the list of demands formulated by the participants: they requested a separate Saraiki regiment in the Pakistani army, insisted on changing employment quotas, and so forth. In the late 1990s and during the following decade, the language problem practically ceased to be important. It is noteworthy, for example, that, out of 21 'demands' made at the Saraiki Conference held in December 2003, only one pertained to language issues *per se* (Rahman 1996a: ch. 10).

If the 'sons of the soil' are satisfied with their economic, political or social status, language movements do not arise. The situation with the Punjabi language in Pakistan may serve as a good example of this.

5. LANGUAGE ATTITUDES OF THE PUNJABI EDUCATED ELITE IN PAKISTAN. Many authors write about the low status of Punjabi in Pakistan, where it is considered the language of illiterates employed in unattractive kinds of jobs (Mansoor 1993:129). Tariq Rahman describes widespread culture-shame concerning Punjabi: in all the elitist English-medium schools he visited, there were policies forbidding students from speaking Punjabi,

teachers and classmates embarrassed students about their mother tongue, calling Punjabi speakers *Paendu* ‘village yokel’ (Rahman 2006a: 73-104).

However, some social groups are not ashamed of speaking Punjabi. One of them – paradoxical though it may seem – is the cream of the Punjabi elite: university professors, highly posted bureaucrats, diplomats, etc. –, people who graduated from elitist English-medium schools and the best universities. Their high social status allows them not to fear being called ‘village yokel’. The language attitudes of the educated elite are particularly interesting because these people determine both the present and the future of the country.

As a participant of the International Conference ‘History, Politics and Society: The Punjab’, organized by the University of the Punjab in Lahore, in December 2008, I interviewed journalists, university professors, students and clerks.¹⁶ Their attitude towards Punjabi was very positive. There must be people who feel embarrassed to call themselves ‘Punjabi speakers’, but I did not happen to meet a single one. On the contrary, all the interviewees demonstrated an attachment to their mother tongue. They were happy to meet a foreigner who spoke their language and willingly discussed the meaning of the term ‘Punjabiya’.¹⁷ All cases of informal communication I had (at university departments, shops, museums, buses, dining-rooms, etc.) were either in Punjabi proper, or in a mix of Urdu, Punjabi and English. Formal communication was, of course, either in Urdu or in English. Most written work in the University was produced in English.

When asked if they identified any threat to the future of the Punjabi language, some of the interviewees expressed their regrets that it was not taught in school, but they were embarrassed when asked if they would send their children to a Punjabi-medium school if such an opportunity were to arise. The majority would undoubtedly not do it, not because they are ashamed of their language but because they do not wish to overburden their children by teaching them their mother tongue when it is useless for getting good jobs. It is worth mentioning that, according to article 251 of the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan, a Provincial Assembly may prescribe measures

¹⁶ The number of people interviewed (about 40) does not allow for large-scale statistical conclusions, but it helps to form a general idea concerning the sociolinguistic situation in Lahore.

¹⁷ The essence of Punjabi culture.

for the teaching, promotion and use of a provincial language in addition to the national language (Urdu). Attempts at implementing that law have been made. In 1990, Balochi, Brahvi and Pashto were introduced as compulsory media of instruction in government schools and all necessary instruction materials were prepared by language enthusiasts; however, in November 1992, these languages were made optional and parents immediately chose Urdu as the medium of instruction for their children (Rahman 1996a: 169). It is easy to predict that had Punjabi language been introduced as medium of instruction at schools, the reaction of Punjabi parents would have been the same.

When asked about the future of their mother tongue, many people said that Punjabi will be preserved through oral transmission from generation to generation.

6. THE FUTURE OF THE PUNJABI LANGUAGE. Rahman (2006a) is a full-length description of the possible future of the languages of Pakistan. The author divides these languages into several groups:

- 1) small dying languages (such as Badeshi, Chilliso, Domaki, Gowro) whose native speakers are shifting to bigger neighbouring languages;
- 2) small languages under much pressure from Urdu (such as Balochi, Brahvi); as important identity markers, these languages will survive as informal languages in the private domain;
- 3) big languages (such as Pashto, Sindhi) which will definitely survive, being powerful identity markers and media of instruction in schools;
- 4) Urdu, an important national and religious symbol, used in lower-level jobs, the media, education, courts, commerce and other domains in Pakistan, is not in danger.

T. Rahman is also optimistic about the future of Punjabi, which he describes as

[...] a huge language, used in the Indian Punjab in many domains of power and, what is even more significant, it is the language of songs, jokes, intimacy and informality in both Pakistan and India. This makes it the language of private pleasure and if so many people use it in this manner, it is not in real danger. (Rahman 2006b: 80)

The representatives of the educated elite I interviewed were also optimistic about Punjabi. For them, Punjabi is the means of informal communication for various social groups and an integral part of the process of self-identification but, at the same time, no importance is given to widening its social functions. Its modest place in the speech repertoire¹⁸ of the educated elite is considered quite normal. This situation seems less paradoxical if we compare the language attitudes and behavior of the Punjabi-speaking Pakistani elite with those of the Punjabi-speaking elite in India.

Prima facie, the position occupied by Punjabi in Pakistan and in the Indian Punjab is absolutely contrasting. In India, the Punjabi language is officially admitted in all necessary social functions, while in Pakistan it is used only in a few radio and TV programs and also by certain writers and poets. However, the speech repertoire of the 'upper strata of Punjabi society' in these two countries is very much similar.

Sukhdev Singh (2006) made a detailed analysis of social background, language attitudes and motivations for choosing English, Punjabi or Hindi as medium of instruction to pursue an M.A. degree in an Indian context. The respondents comprised 253 post-graduate students doing an M.A. at the departments of English, Punjabi and Hindi of the Punjab University in Chandigarh, the Punjabi University in Patiala, and the Guru Nanak Dev University in Amritsar. Among those who chose English as the medium of instruction, 85.1% hailed from an urban setting, and 14.9 % from rural settings. The children of educated parents, students from high-income families, usually preferred English over Punjabi as the medium of instruction because the latter would give them fewer opportunities of finding a good job. The young people who were educated in English (most of whom had graduated from English-medium schools) would hardly read anything in their mother tongue. At best, they would listen to Punjabi songs and talk in Punjabi with their parents and friends. In fact, the mother tongue occupied a similar place in their speech repertoire as in the speech repertoire of Pakistani Punjabis. It seems that, if Punjabi were to acquire in Pakistan the same social functions it has in India, the language attitude of the educated people

¹⁸ Speech repertoire refers to the range of linguistic varieties which a speaker has at his disposal and which he may appropriately use as a member of his speech community.

there would remain practically the same: it would be the language of songs, jokes, intimacy and informal talks, but not a language of great culture, good poetry and prose, not a language for expressing the intellectual demands of the educated members of society.

In order to predict the future of the languages which, according to T. Rahman's forecast, will survive, it is important to study the survey of Urdu-medium and English-medium schools undertaken in December 2002 and January 2003 by the same author (Rahman 2004: 327-346). T. Rahman interviewed students in three types of schools: 1) in Urdu-medium schools; 2) in schools called 'English-medium schools' but in which teaching was mostly in Urdu; 3) in elitist English-medium schools. The author concluded that the students who were studying in Urdu and those who were receiving their education in English had strikingly different opinions about the most fundamental political, religious or ethical problems. The difference was so great as to give the impression that the two communities lived in absolutely different worlds. Students from Urdu-medium schools supported an aggressive foreign policy and the growing islamization of the country, showed less tolerance for religious minorities, and did not support women equality (Rahman 2004: 327-346; Rahman 2005). According to T. Rahman, not only were the students' textbooks and teaching methods different (Rahman 2001; 2002b; 2007), but the teachers' views, the discourses the young people were exposed to inside and outside schools – everything differed significantly. Young people from elitist English-medium schools never read books in their mother tongue nor in Urdu. Even if they achieved 'A' grades in examinations, they claimed to be completely bored by Urdu literature. It has become fashionable among 'the gilded youngsters' to read and discuss English-language books only (Rahman 2004: 327-346, electronic version p.8).

T. Rahman's analysis clearly shows that the real functional gap is not between Urdu as the national language and Punjabi as the majority language devoid of official status, but between English and all the indigenous languages. All creative activities of the most educated and influential social group (a large portion of which consists of the Punjabi-speaking elite) take place in English. Under such circumstances, neither Urdu nor Punjabi can become a motivating force of progress and vehicles of creative ideas. T. Rahman (2004:6) states that 'English is like a sieve which separates the

‘sheep’ from the ‘goats’. According to him, those with fluency in English could hardly make up more than 3 to 4 per cent of the population of Pakistan (Rahman 2005). These figures show perfectly the gap between the economic, political and cultural elite and the rest (about 96%) of the population (Rahman 2006c; 2010).

The English-speaking educated elite is usually said to be bilingual (Urdu/English), trilingual (Punjabi/Urdu/English; Sindhi/Urdu/English; Pashto/Urdu/English, etc.) or multilingual. However, all of the indigenous languages are under strong pressure from Urdu and English. Languages which are transmitted orally or have very limited social functions cannot preserve their vocabulary. Original words are gradually replaced by Urdu or English lexemes. When speaking a mother tongue or Urdu, English-medium graduates use English words for abstract notions or for political terms such as *democracy*, *foreign policy*, *prime minister*, *parliament*, etc. In fact, English and Urdu (and/or any mother tongue) are distributed complementarily in their speech repertoires: Urdu and/or their mother tongue are used to express concrete notions, while intellectual concepts are mainly expressed in English. As shown above, in India, where Punjabi performs all necessary social functions within the state of Punjab, the language plays a similarly limited role in the speech repertoire of the educated elite.

It would be wrong to say that no scholars are aware of the danger of a situation in which indigenous languages survive as cultural stigma rather than cultural capital. Such scholars do raise their voices in favor of ‘additive multilingualism’ (Rahman 2004), but the ruling bureaucrats and the rest of society do not appear to worry about the gradual demise of indigenous languages as means of expressing the intellectual demands of society.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS. This paper analyzed the historical, economic, political and cultural factors concurring to explain why Punjabi, the language of the largest and most privileged ethnic group in Pakistan, has no institutional support in the country. It was shown that, throughout the history of the Punjabi community, religion has been a more important factor in self-identification than ethno-linguistic considerations.

A rather convincing theory claims that national self-identification has prevailed over the religious one in coastal regions of South Asia such as, for example, Gujarat and Bengal. The development of trade and of capitalist

economic relations expedited the awakening of national consciousness in those regions. In the Punjab, similarly to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the religious basis has remained a more important factor of self-identification than the ethno-linguistic one (Brass 1974).

Besides, Punjabi speakers have grown accustomed to a situation in which the official language is different from their mother tongue. One of the main reasons for the lack of institutional support of the Punjabi language in today's Pakistan is – paradoxically – the high economic and political status of the Punjabi community in the country. Language movements in modern South Asia are absolutely different from what occurred in seemingly parallel historical processes of national development in Europe. In almost every European country, the rising bourgeoisie made efforts to standardize and promote its mother tongue, to convert it into the main means of communication at all levels and, through this, to make its use one of the most important tools of nation building. In modern South Asia, ethnic groups usually start language movements when they feel economically and/or politically and/or culturally depressed, in the hope of gaining some privileges as a result of those campaigns. If the 'sons of the soil' are satisfied with their economic, political or social status, language movements do not arise. The situation with the Punjabi language in Pakistan may serve as a good example of this.

The official discrimination of the majority language of Pakistan may also be explained by political and cultural reasons: in the course of Pakistan's modern history, any kind of internal opposition was suppressed in the name of Islam and national security, and, in the country, the term 'culture' has always meant 'Islamic culture'.

The Punjabi community of contemporary Pakistan treats its mother tongue as a means of informal communication (songs, jokes, intimacy and informality) and also as an important identity marker. The fact that Punjabi plays a very limited role in the speech repertoire of native speakers, especially in the speech habits of younger people who are supposed to represent the 'future of the country', is considered quite normal by the educated elite. As a result, the language gradually loses its rich vocabulary and the ability to fulfill the intellectual demands of society, in a process that may be defined as intellectual death of the language.

Similar processes are taking place in various regions of South Asia, though at a different pace. The majority of the creative activities of the most educated and influential groups in society are being carried out in English, while local languages tend to be used by the socio-economically lower and less educated strata of the society. The role of South Asian languages as means of expressing the intellectual demands of their speakers and of preserving their cultural traditions is decreasing with each new generation.

One might say that South Asia has traditionally had a separate language for the educated elite (Sanskrit, Persian, etc.) and different local languages for the people who perform unskilled jobs. English has simply replaced the languages which were previously adopted by the educated elites. In that sense, it is not entirely unlike what is taking place in other parts of the world, such as Europe.

In the modern era of globalization, English is becoming a kind of a universal language for science and other fields of intellectual activity in a great many countries in Europe. However, this often elicits a negative reaction in almost all these countries. In her very popular book, Tove Skuttnab-Kangas (2000) discusses the advantages of preserving linguistic diversity. She proposes that, in postindustrial information-based societies, uniformity will be a handicap. Multilingual societies have access to a greater diversity of knowledge and, consequently, they are more creative. Thus, an education leading to higher levels of multilingualism produces not only local linguistic and cultural capital, but also knowledge capital which, in the information society, may become exchangeable with other types of capital.

Despite the fact that, in Europe, linguistic unification is not as visible as in South Asia and national languages are used in all domains of power, supporters of multilingualism are already concerned. Even though the situation seems more dangerous than in Europe, there is much less worry about it in South Asia, where linguistically unified English-medium education is producing small economic, political and cultural elites whose values and ideas differ strikingly from the values and ideas of the majority of population.

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Ahom and Tangsa: Case studies of language maintenance and loss in North East India

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North East India is probably the most linguistically diverse area on the Indian subcontinent, with long established communities speaking languages of four different families – Austroasiatic, Indo-European, Tai-Kadai and Tibeto-Burman.

Comparing Tai Ahom, language of the rulers of a kingdom that consisted of what is now Assam, with the very diverse Tangsa varieties spoken on the India-Myanmar border, we will discuss factors of language decline and language maintenance.

Tai Ahom has not been spoken as a mother tongue for 200 years, but survives in the large body of manuscripts, and in the language used in religious rituals. While both of these features have been necessary foundations of the ongoing revival of the language, neither was able to maintain the language in its spoken form.

At least 35 different Tangsa sub-tribes are found in India, with more in Myanmar. Each has a distinct linguistic variety, many of which are mutually intelligible while others are not. Despite having no writing until very recently, each variety is still healthy. Since many Tangsas are now Christians, Bible translations are underway, and many Tangsa of all religions are interested in orthography and literacy development. This may lead to standardisation, which would represent a significant loss of diversity.

1. INTRODUCTION. This paper will contrast the situation of two languages/ language groups that are geographically in close proximity, but with very different histories. One, Tai Ahom, once the language of a powerful kingdom,

is no longer spoken as a mother tongue, whereas the other, Tangsa, with a much smaller population, preserves significant linguistic diversity. Most of the Tai Ahom population are monolingual speakers of Assamese,¹ an Indic language and the language of wider communication for most of the North East. In Tangsa communities, Assamese is now the lingua franca for at least some of those whose native varieties are not mutually intelligible. These case studies will demonstrate the complexity of these situations of language endangerment and loss in detail.

Although North East India has only around 3% of India's population, its linguistic and cultural diversity makes it one of the world's linguistic hotspots. Languages of five major language families (Austroasiatic, Dravidian, Indo-European, Tibeto-Burman and Tai Kadai) are spoken there.² The North East also has significant populations of each of the major religions of India (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Sikh, Jewish (Manasseh), Jain, Animist), a situation that is also fluid because of the shifting of animist communities to Christianity, Buddhism, and forms of Hinduism.

Much of the present existing linguistic diversity is due to migration that has occurred over a long period. The Dravidian and Tai-Kadai languages have arrived in relatively recent times – 19th century for Dravidian speakers belonging to communities transported to Assam to work in tea plantations and between 13th and 18th centuries for various Tai-Kadai communities (see Section 2). Austroasiatic and Tibeto-Burman speaking communities, on the other hand, include those who have been present for a very long time, as well as much more recent arrivals. Van Driem (2012: 187) suggests that “Austroasiatic and Tibeto-Burman presence in northeastern India ... must date back to some hoary period of ethnolinguistic prehistory”, but Tibeto-Burman speakers are still arriving, such as the Hakhun group within Tangsa/Nocte³ who have moved into Assam state since 2000.

The number of languages spoken in the North East is not known. Any such calculation depends, of course, on one's definition of “a language”. One

¹ Also known as Asamiya.

² The only village where languages of all five families have been used is Balipathar, Karbi Anglong District, Assam, where there are communities of active speakers of Austroasiatic, Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan and Tai Kadai languages, as well as some whose historic language was Dravidian, believed to be moribund now.

³ Some members of this community prefer the spelling Nokte, the pronunciation of which is approximately /nɔk te/.

way of estimating the linguistic diversity is to use the information contained in the SIL *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009), which now carries the imprimatur of the International Organisation for Standardisation. By our count, out of a total 452 languages listed in *The Ethnologue* for India, 99 are wholly or mostly in the North East, about 22% of the Indian total, in a region representing about 3% of India's population. This is not necessarily a good guide; for example, many of the Tangsa lects are mutually unintelligible, and listing them as a single language significantly understates the linguistic diversity.

The languages examined in this paper were chosen because we have done significant research on them, but also because of the differences between them, Tai Ahom was once spoken as the official language of the Ahom Kingdom that ruled much of Assam from 1228 to 1824; yet, despite its status (and army) it is no longer spoken as a mother tongue. Tangsa, on the other hand, is an incredibly diverse group of lects – a diversity that persists despite migration into the multilingual plains of North East India where Assamese is the lingua franca, and continues into the present era of standardisation and language loss. This is summarised in Table 1:

Language	ISO 639-3 code	Family	Status	Internal variation	Size of ethnic population	Writing
Ahom	aho	Tai-Kadai	no native speakers	unknown ^{a)}	c. 1,000,000	Yes
Tangsa	nst	Tibeto-Burman	actively spoken by all	70 distinct varieties	c. 100,000	No ^{b)}

^{a)} Our knowledge of Ahom is largely based on manuscripts and we cannot make any conclusions about internal diversity on the basis of those. Our assumption is that Ahom, during the period when it was the court language, was much less diverse than Tangsa is today.

^{b)} Traditionally at least. The more recent development of Roman-based orthographies and some native scripts is discussed in section 3.

TABLE 1: The situation of Ahom and Tangsa compared

The location of those who identify as Tai Ahom is primarily in Sibsagar, Jorhat and Dibrugarh districts of Assam, shown in green on Figure 1. These three districts are multicultural and multilingual but Ahom is probably the

largest group at least in Sibsagar district. The Tangsa live in the Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh as well as the neighbouring Tinsukia district of Assam, the latter shown by the blue circle in Figure 1. Tangsa are the majority in the Kharsang, Jayrampur and Changlang areas within Changlang District of Arunachal Pradesh.

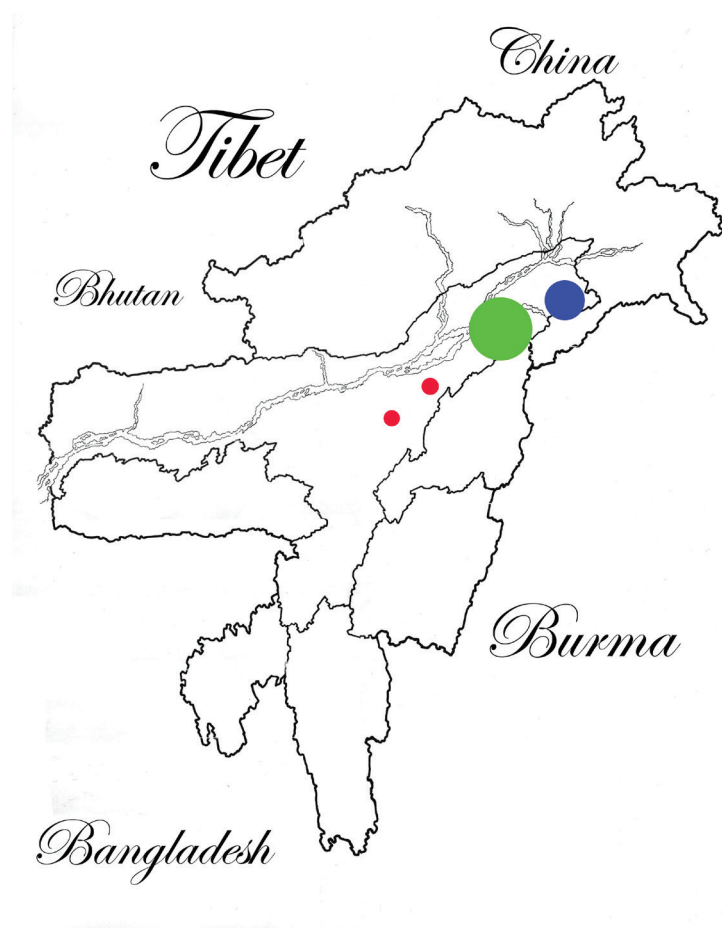


FIGURE 1: Map of Assam showing the Ahom area (green) and Tangsa area (blue)

2. TAI AHOM. According to traditional accounts, a group of Tai, led by a prince named Sukapha,⁴ arrived in Assam in 1228 from the kingdom of Mau Lung which is now divided between Shan and Kachin States in Myanmar (Burma) and the Dehong Dai autonomous region in Yunnan Province, South West China. Sukapha founded a kingdom which ruled in the Brahmaputra valley for 600 years.⁵ In addition to speaking a Tai language, the Tai Ahoms had their own religion the rituals of which were performed by priestly clans (see 2.3. below). Their kingdom gradually expanded and dominated most of the valley in the 16th to 18th centuries. However, despite this political domination, during this period the Tai-speaking Ahoms culturally and linguistically assimilated with local communities most of whom were Assamese speaking Hindus. It seems that by early in the 19th century, everyday usage of Ahom language had ceased and that Ahom people all spoke Assamese as their mother tongue.⁶

Tai Ahom is therefore usually regarded as a dead language, but it survives in three ways: (1) in vast collections of manuscripts, (2) as a ritual language in Ahom religious ceremonies, and (3) as a language undergoing revival.

One complication in discussing the situation of Tai Ahom is that there are five other groups of Tai people in North East India: Aiton, Khamti, Khamyang, Phake and Turung (see Grierson 1904: 58f, Diller 1992, Morey 2005: 13f). This picture of 6 Tai languages including Ahom in North East

⁴ Written as *ꯏꯪ꯫ꯪꯛꯩ꯰* in the Ahom script, which is transcribed as <siuw ka pha>. Because the Ahom script does not mark tone and perhaps underspecified the vowel contrasts, we cannot be sure of the pronunciation of this name in the original Ahom. Evidence suggests that Tai Aiton is the closest modern variety to Ahom (Morey 2005: 178), and the Aiton consultant Nabin Shyam Phalung gave the meaning of this King's name is "tiger-equal to-sky", which is pronounced *suw¹ kaa² phaa³* in Aiton, where tone 1 is level, tone 2 high falling and tone 3 low falling (see Morey 2005: 134f for an explanation of Aiton phonology).

⁵ The history of the Ahom kingdom is discussed in detail in Gait (1905). The most widely available translation of the Ahom Chronicles (Buranji) is G.C. Barua (1930), though Ranoo (1996) is the more reliable translation.

⁶ A manuscript belonging to Tulsi Phukan, photographs of which will be archived in the British Library Endangered Archives Programme under the name EAP373_TulsiPhukan_KhunLungKhunLai, was copied in the reign of the Ahom King Kamaleshwar Singha (1795-1811). The copying is of a quality that suggests the copyist was a speaker of a Tai language. Thus we assume that in the early decades of the 19th century there were still a few speakers of Ahom remaining.

India is based on Grierson (where Aiton is called Aitonia, Khamyang is called Nora, Phake is called Phakial and Turung is called Tairong). Even though the linguistic diversity within Tangsa (see section 3 below) is much greater than between these six Tai varieties, due to the influence of Grierson, each of these groups is regarded as having its own language, and each has its own ISO⁷ language code, while Tangsa has a single code and is regarded as one.

Today only Aiton, Khamti and Phake are being learned by children, while Khamyang is only spoken by a small number of elderly people.⁸ Each of these is more or less mutually intelligible. Turung people, on the other hand, speak a variety of an unrelated Tibeto-Burman language, Singpho (described in detail in Morey 2010).

The word Ahom is not a Tai word. In Assamese, the word for Assam is pronounced [ahɔm], a word for which a number of etymologies have been suggested, discussions of which go back to at least the time of Grierson (1904: 61, footnote 2). The two most likely explanations given by Grierson are that *Assam* is either from Sanskrit *A-sama* ‘peerless’ or (perhaps more likely) that the second syllable is “simply Shām or Shān”, a word etymologically related to *Siam* and used today, in the form Shyam, as the surname for most Aiton, Khamyang and Turung people. The word Ahom is not used in the Tai Ahom texts from the 18th century and before. In the *Bar Amra*, the Ahom-Assamese lexicon written in Ahom script dating from 1795 (see 2.2. and 2.4.), the term Ahom is given as the Assamese translation for *Tai*. It seems therefore that the Tai-speaking ancestors of the present day Tai-Ahom called themselves simply Tai, overtime acquiring the name Tai-Ahom, the term that is used today (often abbreviated simply to Ahom) to distinguish a community and a language that are both distinct from the other Tai varieties of North East India.

2.1. DECLINE OF THE TAI AHOM LANGUAGE. So what are the reasons for the decline of the Tai Ahom language as a spoken variety and the loss of some aspects of Ahom culture? The Ahom kingdom’s establishment, traditionally

⁷ International Organisation for Standardization. The codes are listed in the *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009).

⁸ Nonetheless, moves to revitalise the Khamyang language are underway, and there is now a Facebook group for those wishing to revitalise it.

dated at 1228, was done by a group migrating from the south east, large numbers of whom were male army members, who would have taken local non-Tai speaking wives. The Ahom kingdom remained a relatively small polity until it expanded during the 16th and 17th centuries, commencing with the conquests of King Suhummung (1497-1539). Terwiel (1996: 276) suggests that this expansion, by bringing the Ahoms into contact with “highly developed cultures in the general orbit of the civilizations of the Indian subcontinent” led to a “rapid assimilation of the Ahom tradition to the more general Assamese one”. Thus Tai Ahoms came to follow various aspects of the Hindu religion, and “the Ahom language and Ahom script were relegated to the religious sphere”, from which its survival as a spoken language was no longer possible.

The Ahom script has certainly helped to maintain the Ahom language in all of the ways in which it survives today, as we shall discuss in 2.2., but the presence of the script was not enough to save the spoken language from decline. The same is true of the presence of a powerful army, one that had defeated the great Mughals in the 17th century. Perhaps, in this case, the army was a factor in language loss because, at the height of the Ahom kingdom, probably a large majority of the armed forces were non-Tai speaking and the language of army (and consequently of government) would have needed to shift to the more widespread Indic language, Assamese.

As far as the loss of the spoken language, and indeed of the wider cultural shift, is concerned, we suggest the following factors:

- Increasing and eventually overwhelmingly non-Tai population of the Ahom kingdom (particularly after 1500);
- Inter-marriage of the Tai speakers with non-Tai from the beginning of the Ahom Kingdom;
- Contact with the cultures of India;
- Conversion to Hinduism, particularly under the influence of the Hindu Sage Srimanta Shankaradeva (16th century);⁹
- The costly nature of the traditional Ahom rituals.

That Ahom was in danger of being lost was clearly known by those who wished to preserve it. The creation of the Ahom lexicons known as the *Bar*

⁹ Reputed to have lived from 1449 to 1568; his period of greatest activity corresponded with the power of Ahom king Suhummung.

Amra and *Loti Amra* in the late 18th century, texts that exist in multiple copies, was one sign of the attempt to preserve the language.

Despite the cultural loss, the Ahom have not disappeared as a community. Even in the mid 19th century, large numbers of people identified as Ahom – the population being estimated at 148,000 in 1872 and at around 1,000,000 in 1989, with around 33% of the population in the districts of Upper Assam (Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh) being identified as Ahom (Terwiel 1996: 277). We will now consider what survives of their linguistic heritage.

2.2. MANUSCRIPTS. The Ahom manuscripts which have survived to the present day encompass at least the following types of texts:

- a. History (called *Buranji* in Assamese)¹⁰
- b. Creation stories
- c. Spirit Calling Texts
 - i. Khon Ming Lung Phai
 - ii. Khon Ming Kang Phai
 - iii. Khon Ming Phai Noi
- d. Mantras and Prayers
- e. Predictions and Augury
 - i. Phe Lung Phe Ban
 - ii. Du Kai Seng (chicken bone augury)
 - iii. Ban Seng
- f. Calendar (Lakni)
- g. Stories
 - i. Traditional Tai stories
 - ii. Stories of Buddhist origin
- h. Lexicons (Bar Amra, Loti Amra)
- i. Writing Practice

One of the surprising features is the significant number of

¹⁰ The word *Buranji* used to describe Ahom histories has been extended to refer to all Assamese histories. The word can be pluralised in the English used in Assam as *Buranjis*. One suggested etymology is that it should be read ৰাৱণ চি (bau ran chi), literally ‘never to be shown’ (Aimya Khang Gohain 1991: 54). In the Phake language this would be *mau’ han^t ci^t* ‘NEG-see-show’. Another etymology would base the first element on Sanskrit *purāṇa*- ‘ancient’.

manuscripts containing stories that are unambiguously of Buddhist origin. Examples of this include the *Nemi Mang Phura*, as well as the much longer story that precedes it in the manuscript owned by Gileswar Bailung Phukan at Patsako.¹¹ The extent of Buddhist influence within the Ahom kingdom is a matter of controversy but, as we shall see in section 2.3. below, Buddhist features are also found in some of the Ahom prayers (*mantras*) that are still in use.

Most of the manuscripts have not been translated in modern times. Yet the interest in finding out their meaning really never stopped, from the time the language ceased to be spoken as a mother tongue right up to the present day. Terwiel (1988) describes the process of translating an old Ahom manuscript first published in Brown (1837) and published again in Grierson (1904: 118-9). This is one of the creation manuscripts, and contains some material that has been translated by us as *Pvn Ko Mvng* (Creation of the World),¹² but the translation in Brown and Grierson is clearly flawed. The next major step was G. C. Barua (1930) who translated the Ahom Buranji, a huge manuscript of history from mythological times up to the end of the Ahom Kingdom. This translation is largely accurate, but the problem with it is that the reader (even the careful reader skilled in Tai language) is not usually able to identify translation errors. A much more scholarly work is Ranoo (1996), a translation into standard Thai, but this work is not well known in North East India because few people there can speak or read Standard Thai. Terwiel and Ranoo (1992) has been for a generation the most accessible and most reliable translation of an Ahom text, rendered in both English and Thai (transliterated into English, with cognates in Thai and a translation into both English and Thai). This deals with ritual texts.

The Lexicons, *Bar Amra* and *Loti Amra* have been translated to a large extent and formed the basis of two 20th-century Ahom dictionaries (G. C. Barua 1920 and B. Barua and Phukan 1964), as well as of the on-line

¹¹ To be archived at the British Library, Endangered Archives Programme (<http://eap.bl.uk/>), as EAP373_GileshwarBailung_NemiMang.

¹² The text of *Pvn Ko Mvng* can be searched and a .doc version of the translation and glossing can be downloaded from the *Tai and Tibeto Burman Languages of Assam* website (<http://sealang.net/ahom>). The photos of the *Pvn Ko Mvng* manuscript and .pdf of the translation and glossing is available at the DoBeS archive (go to <http://www.mpi.nl/DoBeS> and then follow a link to projects, then Tangsa, Tai and Singpho in North East India, which will open the IMDI browser, and then search Tai Ahom).

More recently, our project has been transcribing and translating a number of texts, concentrating on spirit calling texts (*Ming Mvng Lung Phai*), mantras or prayers (see 2.3. below), creation stories (*Pvn Ko Mvng*) and Buddhist stories (*Nemi Mang*), four genres not previously much translated.

(1) $\text{ŋ}^{\text{ɛ}}$ (kong) *n.* 1. hill; 2. echo; 3. gun; 4. over-sunned paddy;
5. drum; 6. courtyard; 7. jaw; 8. Indian aconite;
n., v. 9. heap;
v. 10. control; 11. prune; 12. prepare for husking;
13. hide; 14. spin; 15. anticipate;
adj. 16. wide; 17. curved.

2.3. RELIGIOUS RITUAL. The status of the traditional Ahom religion is a matter of some debate among scholars. Terwiel, who studied the Ahom very closely in the 1980s, wrote in 1996 that “the anthropologist ... is able to demonstrate that the Ahom cannot read their ancient manuscripts. He can

further show that the rituals there described have nothing in common with the constructs of after the 1960s. To him the claims of historical continuity are simply untrue” (1996: 290). Terwiel has described these religious rituals as “pseudo-old Ahom ritual” (1996: 286).

Our position is different from Terwiel’s in several senses. The statement “the Ahom cannot read their ancient manuscripts” turns on the meaning of “read”. A large number of Ahoms can read the letters and approximately pronounce the sounds that were intended but without understanding the meaning. Many of the Ahom priests, who are the custodians of their manuscripts, know the content of the manuscripts, at least in a general sense, being able to say which is a history, which is a creation story and which a text containing predictions, and indeed can give an overall summary of the meaning of the text. They also know the meanings of a large number of Tai words, due to the copying and study of the *Amras* (Ahom-Assamese lexicons), a process that appears to have gone on continuously since the end of the 18th century.

On the other hand it is true that none of the Ahom priests that we have met are able to give the kind of word-by-word gloss that a scholar like Chaichuen can give. Nevertheless, in our view, the knowledge that the priests do have represents a partial survival of traditional knowledge.

The following are some of the features of what the historical Ahom religion would have been like:

- Belief in the importance and ubiquitous nature of spirits (*khwan~khon*)¹³ – both good and bad;
- The practice of calling back those spirits if they are felt to have been lost;¹⁴
- Placating the spirits by costly rituals, animal sacrifice and the offerings of costly items.

One ritual that we have studied in detail was the *No Khowa* (‘new rice’)

¹³ The spelling of this word in Ahom could be read as either *khwan* (as it is pronounced in Thailand) or *khon* (as it is pronounced by other Tai speaking groups now in North East India. We cannot be sure of the pronunciation in Ahom times.

¹⁴ A ceremony called *Rik Khwan Miung* (calling the spirit of the country) was performed on 2nd July 2012. It is likely that the text that we have translated, *Ming Mvng Lung Phai*, was used at this ceremony.

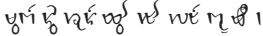
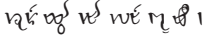
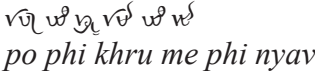
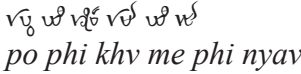
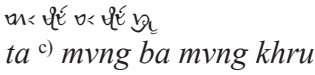
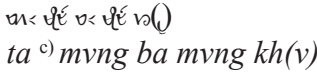
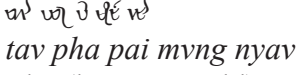
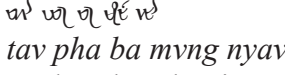
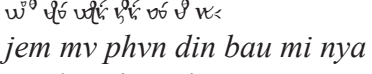
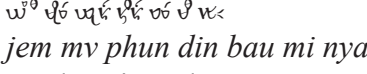
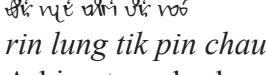
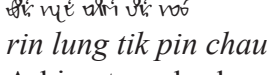
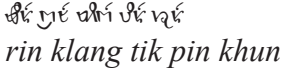
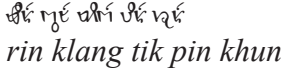
ceremony performed in the village of Koronga, near to Parijat in Sibsagar District, Assam, on 17th November 2008. The Ahom priests were led by Chau Tileshwar Mohan. The male family members sat in the traditional mud kitchen, a place of considerable reverence in those Ahom villages where such traditions are maintained. The prayers, described as *khvk phi dam* (consisting of three words: ‘placate/worship’, ‘spirit’ and ‘ancestor spirit’) were repeated several times.

The prayers were made to four deities, whose altars were arranged in front of the priests from their left to their right. The four deities were described as *Lang Ku Ri*, *La Reng*, *Leng Don* and *Ja Seng Pha*. We have transcribed and translated the prayers uttered in part of that ritual, and found that they are very similar to a prayer found in an old manuscript, dating from at least the 18th century, owned by Chau Dhiren Baruah of Simaluguri.¹⁵ The manuscript prayer also mentions the first three ‘deities’ in the same order, *Lang Ku Ri*, *La Ring* and *Chau Pha Phit Khan Kham*, literally the ‘Lord of Lightning with the golden axe’, which refers to Lengdon. The fact that these are mentioned in the same order, and that the name given to *Lengdon* is a descriptive name rather than the actual name, leads us to suggest that some part of the meaning of the prayer has come down to modern times.

On the other hand, we have not found *Ja Sing Pha* mentioned in Dhiren’s manuscript, perhaps adding weight to the suggestion by Terwiel (1996: 282) calling into question the Ja Sing Pha ritual he witnessed, saying that it “reminded one more of a Hindu *puja*” and that some of the terms used by the priests in explaining the ritual were not grammatically Tai.

Table 2 compares part of the text of the No Khowa prayer with Dhiren Baruah’s manuscript:

¹⁵ This will be archived at the British Library, Endangered Archives Programme, with the name EAP373_DhirenBaruah_Mantra. The manuscript is in very poor condition.

No Khowa Prayer	Dhiren Bruah's Manuscript
<p>  <i>pok ngau khun thau nyav lang ku ri</i> The old Lord mountain, the great lord Langkuri. </p>	<p>  <i>khun thau nyav lang ku ri</i> The great lord Langkuri. </p>
<p>  <i>po phi khru me phi nyav</i> The father spirit is big, the mother spirit is big. </p>	<p>  <i>po phi khv me phi nyav</i> The father spirit is big, the mother spirit is big. </p>
<p>  <i>ta^{c)} mvng ba mvng khru</i> The country is called a great country. </p>	<p>  <i>ta^{c)} mvng ba mvng kh(v)</i> The country is called a great country. </p>
<p>  <i>tav pha pai mvng nyav</i> The (human world) under the sky is put in order as a large country. </p>	<p>  <i>tav pha ba mvng nyav</i> Under the sky is called the great country. </p>
<p>  <i>jem mv phvn din bau mi nya</i> At that time there was no grass on the ground. </p>	<p>  <i>jem mv phun din bau mi nya</i> At that time there was no grass on the ground. </p>
<p>  <i>rin lung tik pin chau</i> A big stone broke open to become the Lord. </p>	<p>  <i>rin lung tik pin chau</i> A big stone broke open to become the King. </p>
<p>  <i>rin klang tik pin khun</i> The heap of stones broke open to become the Prince. </p>	<p>  <i>rin klang tik pin khun</i> The heap of stones break open to become the Prince. </p>

^{c)} Chaichuen assumes this to be the word *ti* 'place', and may represent the way this word was pronounced at the time of this manuscript.

TABLE 2: Sample of No Khowa prayer compared to the MS EAP373_DhirenBaruah_Mantra¹⁶

¹⁶ Our transcriptions in this table consist of the Ahom script and a line representing a possible phonemic transcription of the original Ahom. This is done using a practical

The meaning conveyed in the last two lines is also reflected in a portion of the *Pvn Ko Mvng* ('creation of the world') manuscript, as shown in (2):

(2)	𑜋𑜪𑜫	𑜋𑜪	𑜋𑜪	𑜋𑜪𑜫	𑜋𑜪	𑜋𑜪𑜫	𑜋𑜪𑜫
	sing	kam	pha	ko	mi	tang	chau
	pn	pn	pn	link	have	with	resp
	𑜋𑜪	𑜋𑜪𑜫	𑜋𑜪	𑜋𑜪𑜫	𑜋𑜪		
	pha	tik	pin	khun			
	stone	break	be	prince			

'And *Sing Kam Pha* had a respected stone which he broke up and made into princes.' *Pvn Ko Mvng* (Creation of the World), 10v5¹⁷

Table 2 and example (2) show that the Tai language used in the *No Khowa* prayer is the same as that of the old Ahom manuscripts, and is not "pseudo-Ahom language", a term used by Terwiel (1996) to describe some examples of the Ahom language revival. According to the Ahom priests we have spoken with, these prayers have a long history and were handed down from generation to generation. The fact that the language used is genuine Tai language does not of itself prove that the *No Khowa* prayer (and associated rituals) was indeed handed down through the generations, rather than being copied from a manuscript like that of Dhiren Baruah. This debate about the authenticity of revived/reviving cultural practices, like those of the Ahom, is one that is likely to continue into the future.

We mentioned above that Buddhist influences are found in some Ahom prayers. Consider (3), a section of a prayer called *Jon Ming* 'beg tutelary spirit' which precedes one of the most commonly performed Ahom prayers, *Ai Seng Lau*.¹⁸

orthography which digraphs such as <ph> and <ng> rather than <p^h> and <ŋ>. We believe that the proto Tai distinction of high and mid-high vowels (/i~/e/, /u~/o/ and /ɯ~/ɤ/) had been lost by the late Ahom period, leaving six distinct vowels, /i/, /u/, /ɯ/, /ɛ/, /ɔ/ and /a/ (Morey 2005: 178). In the practical orthography used in this paper, /ɛ/ and /ɔ/ are notated as <e> and <o> and /ɯ/ as <v>.

¹⁷ Photographs of this manuscript will be archived at the Endangered Archives Programme under the name EAP373_TileswharMohan_PvnKoMvng.

¹⁸ We have recorded this prayer performed to honour the Ahom manuscripts prior to them being photographed by our research team.

(3)	𑜋𑜨	𑜇𑜨	𑜋𑜨	𑜇𑜨	𑜇𑜨𑜃𑜫	𑜇𑜨	𑜇𑜨𑜃𑜫		
	chau	phra	chau	tra	phura	tara	along		
	resp	(God)	resp	(law)	creator	creator	(Bodhisattva)		
	𑜇𑜨𑜃𑜫	𑜇𑜨	𑜇𑜨𑜃𑜫	𑜇𑜨	𑜇𑜨	𑜋𑜨	𑜋𑜨	𑜇𑜨	𑜇𑜨
	sik kya	ra	ni pan	boi	mu	chau	kau	vi	𑜇𑜨
	(Sikkya)	create	(Nirvana)	pray	2sg	resp	1sg	voc	

‘The God and Creator, the Lord Lengdon who is in Nirvana, we pray to you, O my lord!’

The words whose glosses are shown in brackets, *phra*, *tra*, *along*, *sikkya*, and *nipan* are all Buddhist concepts, that appear to have been ‘imported’ into the Ahom prayers. Chaichuen Khamdaengyodtai suggested that each of them could also be analysed as Tai terms, for example *phura* being in Shan 𑜇𑜨𑜃𑜫 **phu;laa** ‘person-create’ and *tra* as 𑜇𑜨𑜃𑜫 **tolaa** ‘body-creator’. Thus this line may represent a Buddhist influence but the substratum may be genuinely Tai.

2.4. AHOM LANGUAGE REVIVAL. In this paper we will not deal in detail with the Ahom linguistic revival, which dates at least from the early 20th century. Even before modern technology made printing easier, two major Ahom dictionaries, G.C. Barua (1920) and B.K. Barua and Phukan (1964), were produced, and a ground breaking *Ahom Primer* (G.K. Barua 1936) was written to assist people to learn the language. Since the creation of the first Ahom Truetype font¹⁹ there has been a huge increase in the publication of word lists, primers and texts in Ahom.²⁰

Despite this considerable enthusiasm for language revival, there is not much actual usage of a revived Ahom language, and most of the small number of Tai Ahom people who can speak Tai have learned one of the spoken Tai languages (Phake or Aiton, see Morey 2005), rather than being fluent speakers of revival Ahom. In other words we do not find the kind of

¹⁹ Downloadable from our Tai and Tibeto-Burman languages of Assam website (<http://sealang.net/assam>).

²⁰ There are far too many of these to list here, but some examples include primers like Kar (2005) and editions of manuscripts, with transcriptions and translations, like Mohan (2010).

fluent second language learners that we do find in the Cornish revival in Cornwall,²¹ much less the native speakers found in the revival of Hebrew.²²

The identifiable stages of the Ahom language revival are listed below:

- 1795 – The production of the Ahom-Assamese dictionaries *Bar Amra* and *Loti Amra*, during the last stages of the Ahom language's decline;
- 1837 – First publication of an Ahom text by Brown (1837) 'Plate 4 Specimens of the Ahom, or Assam Character', the first translation of which was presented in Jenkins (1837);²³
- 1904 – Publication of translations of texts into Ahom made by G.C. Barua, in Grierson (1904);
- 1920 – *Ahom-Assamese-English dictionary*, prepared by G.C. Barua;
- 1936 – *Ahom Primer*, prepared by G.K. Barua, containing information provided by the Aiton speaker, Mohendra Phalung;
- 1968 – Memorandum listing the arguments in favour of the recognition of a distinct Tai Ahom identity (see Terwiel 1996: 279);
- 1981 – Formation of *Ban Ok Pup Lik Miong Tai* (Eastern Tai Literary Organisation);
- 1980s – Introduction of the teaching of Tai Ahom language as a subject in some primary schools.

Terwiel (1996: 283) pointed out that, in regard to the Ahom language, the 1968 Memorandum claimed that "the priestly classes use it as mother tongue", a claim one still hears sometimes, though we have never met any priest who can speak Ahom in a fluent way. The revived language has been described by Terwiel as a "pseudo-Ahom language". He cited as an example

²¹ The author of this paper is a supporter of the Cornish language revival, is descended from Cornish speakers and has learned one of the varieties of revived Cornish sufficiently to pass the Gorsedh examination (Grade 4) (<http://www.kesva.org/examinations>).

²² Hebrew shares in common with Ahom that it was preserved in the religious sphere for hundreds of years before the spoken language was revived. The key difference is that these religious texts were well known to large numbers of Jewish people throughout the period when Hebrew was not spoken, and the meanings of the texts were widely studied and discussed.

²³ This text and its translation was discussed in detail by Terwiel (1989: 125-126). To make the translation, Jenkins had the help of Juggoram Khargaria Phokan, who at first could not do the work and sent it to Jorhat where it was read by members of the Ahom priestly caste.

the name of the Eastern Tai Literary Organisation, *Ban Ok Pup Lik Miong Tai* which word by word means ‘sun come.out book read country Tai’ a structure which would be ungrammatical in Tai language, where the head noun would be expected first in the phrase.²⁴

As far as we know, no assessment of the success or otherwise of the program of teaching Ahom in schools has ever been undertaken.

3. TANGSA. Tangsa is the name given in India to a community of at least several tens of thousands living on both sides of the India-Myanmar border. With the name Tangsa, they are a scheduled tribe under the Indian Constitution (listed under ‘other Naga tribes’). The name Tangsa was not used prior to Indian independence, and was coined in the 1950s by Indian Government Officials. Bipin Borgohain, former Political Officer, Tirap Frontier Division, wrote: “the once subjugated but now liberated and resurgent lovable Tangsa (Tang = Mountain, sa = person), a word which was specially coined by the undersigned and accepted by the tribe and the Government for official use ...” (Foreword written by Bipin Borgohain in Barua 1991: viii).

As best we can tell, the term Tangsa was created to refer to small communities living in what is now the Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh and neighbouring areas of Assam that were not otherwise categorised as belonging to one of the bigger languages like Singpho (ISO 639-3:sgp), and whose languages were clearly related. If such a group was within what is now Tirap district, it got classified as Nocte (ISO 639-3:njb).²⁵ The International Organisation for Standardisation have coded Tangsa as ISO 639-3:nst, under the name ‘Naga Tase’. This name was chosen because the ISO codes are based on the SIL Ethnologue (Lewis 2009), and the word *Tase* is the Chamchang Tangsa pronunciation of the word Tangsa, and the Chamchang were the first sub-tribe of Tangsa to commence a Bible

²⁴ Similar things have happened with the Cornish language revival. The Cornish festival in Australia, *Kernewek Lowender*, which word by word means ‘Cornish happiness’ would be rendered *Lowender Kernewek* in ‘authentic’ Cornish, in which, like Tai languages, modifiers follow nouns.

²⁵ Groups that are found in both places, like the Ponthai (Phong) thus get called either Tangsa or Nocte, depending on which district they live in. Similarly, the Hakhun in Ledo (near to Changlang district) are grouped under Tangsa, but the Hakhun in Tirap district are regarded as Nocte.

Translation (see 3.3. below).

In Myanmar, the term Tangshang came into use in April 2003, “inaugurated by the concurrently named Tangshang Central Culture and Literature Committee with a mass meeting in the township center of Nanyun. The name Tangshang is derived from *Tang Nyuwang* and *Shang Nyuwang*, two siblings in the oral history.” (Nathan Statezni pers.comm.) Despite the similarity of the terms *Tangsa* and *Tangshang*, they do not appear to be cognate, and they do not refer to exactly the same groups; some groups that would be called Nocte in India are subsumed under Tangshang in Myanmar.

The data collected by Thomas (2009) in India and Statezni and Ahkhi (2011) in Myanmar/Burma, together with our research, show that there are about 70 sub-tribes²⁶ of Tangsa/Tangshang, each speaking a distinct variety, some mutually intelligible and some not.

Prior to the 1950s, in India, these groups now gathered together as Tangsa seem to have been referred to only by their own group name, or sub-tribe name. A 1927 British map (Tandy 1927) names some of these as Moklum Naga, Mossang Naga, Jugli Naga, Tikhak Naga and so on.²⁷ Around 35 of these groups are found in India.²⁸

Each sub-tribe has its own autonym, which is usually different from the ‘general name’ used by everyone else to refer to them. For example, the people described as Moklum actually call themselves Muklom, those who are described as Ponthai call themselves Phong, and those whose general name is Kimsing have the name Chamchang as their autonym. In addition, each group has its own name for every other group.

We will not discuss the linguistic diversity of Tangsa in detail here, but it is certainly the case that, while some of the language varieties included in it are mutually intelligible, others are certainly not. We will exemplify this in Table 3, which gives a series of words in four varieties of Tangsa, Champang (general name Thamphang) and Cholim (general name

²⁶ The term sub-tribe is used by the Tangsa people to refer to each of these. As a whole, Tangsa are a Scheduled Tribe in terms of the Indian Constitution.

²⁷ After several years of work among the Tangsa, we can attest that, while most Tangsa people are happy to be categorised as ‘Naga’, many are not, particularly some of those who are not Christian. In particular, many Tikhak people now prefer not to be given the name ‘Naga’, although that was used in connection with them in the 1927 map.

²⁸ The most up to date full list of Tangsa/Tangshang groups is available on the Wikipedia Tangsa site (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tangsa_people).

Tonglum), Chamchang (general name Kimsing) and Mueshaungx (general name Mossang):

Gloss	Champang	Cholim	Chamchang	Mueshaungx
snake	punu	pu ³	pau ³ (paüf)	puu ³
bee	ne?nu	ɲɤ ²	ni? (nyiq)	na?
monkey	jukku	βo ²	jokβi ¹ (yokwix)	wir ² sul ³
pig	wɛkku	βak ¹	βa? (wa?)	wauk
mouse, rat	ju?po	zu ²	zuk (juk)	juu? p ^h uu?
buffalo	lumo	ɲe ³	ɲi ³ (ngif)	ɲa ³
elephant	bokla	tɕ ^h a ¹	tɕɤ ¹ (chiix)	tɕɔ ¹ , boklɔ ²
tiger	sɛpbe	tɕ ^h ɲɤ ¹	tɕi? (chiq)	tɕa?
bear	sɛpba	tɕap ² ba ²	tɕapbi ² (chapbi)	tɕəpbɔ ²
ant	sجامu	xip ¹ xa ²	sai ¹ sɤ ² (saixsii)	si ¹ sɔ ²
deer	kahu	k ^h i ¹ go ²	tɕ ^h i ² ɲi ² (chhingi)	
frog	lutja	luk ¹ ha ²	makp ^h aɲ ² (makphang)	lukbur ²

TABLE 3: Some words for animals in several varieties of Tangsa

Both the Cholim and Chamchang lists are marked for tonal categories. In Cholim tone 1 is high level and glottalised; tone 2 is low falling and tone 3 (less frequent) is high falling, whereas in Chamchang tone 1 is low falling, tone 2 is mid level and tone 3 is high falling. Chamchang words are presented phonemically as well as with the orthography devised by Rev. Yanger Thungwa. The Champang words have not been marked for tonal categories because we have not yet been able to establish the categories for tones in Champang. We can see that whereas more than half of the Cholim words in the table are monosyllabic, all of the Champang words are disyllabic. Some of the words that are monosyllabic in Cholim are disyllabic in Mueshaungx, such as *juu?* *p^huu?* ‘rat’. The second syllable is not obligatory in Mueshaungx, whereas apparently it is in Champang.²⁹

²⁹ In Chamchang, on the other hand, *juk* means ‘mouse’ and *jukphuk* means a ‘wild rat, forest mouse’.

Thus, one feature that distinguishes Champang from other Tangsa varieties is that almost all Champang nouns are disyllabic. Several of the Champang words are cognate with those in the other three varieties, with an additional syllable that is perhaps reconstructable to *ku, literally ‘mother’ in several related varieties and used as a classifier for animals in several others.

Within Tangsa, we can identify one subgroup having certain linguistic and cultural features in common. The Pangwa, who include the Cholim, Chamchang and Mueshaungx but not Champang, make up about half of the Tangsa sub-tribes, and sing a song called Wihu song or Sahwi song (see Barkataki-Ruscheweyh and Morey 2013, Morey and Schoepf forthcoming). We have studied the language of this song style in some detail, and found that it probably preserves an earlier form of the language, perhaps a Proto-Pangwa-Tangsa; in other words if comparative reconstruction were undertaken of the Pangwa varieties, the reconstruction would probably be very similar to the song language.

Consider Table 4, where four words that have the coda *-a* in song language are compared with Proto-Tibeto-Burman (based on Matisoff 2003) and Singpho (based on our own data) on the one hand, and with three spoken varieties on the other. As we can see, the song language preserves the proto vowel, where the three spoken varieties have undergone vowel shift, to *-e* in Cholim, *-i* in Chamchang and *-ai* in Mungray.

Proto TB	Singpho	(Mungray) Song language	Cholim spoken	Chamchang spoken	Mungray spoken	Gloss
-a	-a	-a	-e	-i (-e)	-ai	
*m-ka	chinghka	kalue	kelyo	kilü	kailung	‘door’
*na	na	na	nekyoe	ni	nai	‘ear’
*ka	-	ka	ke	ki	kai	‘go’
*tsa~*za	kāsa	sa	se	se	sai	‘child’

TABLE 4: Wihu song language compared with spoken Tangsa varieties

The importance of song language is that it has functioned as a kind of ‘common language’ even when the spoken varieties have diverged, as we can see from Table 4. Older speakers report that, in former times, everyone could understand the song language, even when the spoken language of other

people was difficult to understand. Older speakers are, by and large, more able to understand a range of different varieties than the younger speakers, and we have observed that younger speakers from different Pangwa sub-tribes generally communicate with each other in Assamese rather than their own Tangsa varieties.

Another interesting feature of the Pangwa varieties is that they were paired: from many different consultants we have heard that two varieties originally spoken in nearly neighbouring villages were very similar and fully mutually intelligible. This similarity does not mean, however, that these two varieties were identical. Longri for example, preserves *-a where Cholim has undergone a shift from *-a to -e. This does not mean that Longri is closer to other varieties that have preserved *-a. Longri and Cholim do share an almost identical TAM marking system (Morey 2013) which differs significantly from other Pangwa varieties.

As well as being linguistically diverse, the Tangsa are now very diverse in religious practice. A small number of people maintain the traditional animist practices, including animal sacrifice, but most Tangsa have converted to various larger religions, Christianity (Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic and other denominations), Theravada Buddhism and Rang Fraa, a kind of codification of the traditional practices undertaken with the support of Hindu organisations.

3.1. LINGUISTIC ECOLOGY. Most of the approximately 70 sub-tribes have relatively small populations; possibly around 1000 for most of the sub-tribes but more for the larger groups, which in India include the Mossang (Mueshaungx), Tikhak, Longchang, Muklom and Joglei. We present here a brief overview of the linguistic ecology of Tangsa, in the following dot points:

- The linguistic ecology of the Tangsa in the period before migration into India seems to have been one linguistic variety per village (Statezni 2012). We know, for example, that the original Cholim village was near to the original Longri village, and that is why these two sub-tribes are paired;³⁰

³⁰ The top right-hand corner of the United States Army Map Service map entitled Sibsagar NG46-8 shows the ancestral villages, in most cases one for each of the sub-tribes.

- The original villages were often at some distance from each other and surrounded by forest: communities were thus inward-looking and self-reliant; Non-Tangsa people lived some distance away, and were most of the time out of contact;
- There was (and remains) a clan system that crosses linguistic/sub-tribe boundaries;
- Marriage could (and can) be with someone of the same sub-tribe but not the same clan;
- While the lects of the sub-tribes were different, people generally understood the varieties of those with whom they were in contact, as well as those that were linguistically similar;
- There was often linguistic mixing after marriage, with parents speaking different varieties; it was the father-tongue rather than the mother-tongue that was usually passed on;
- In earlier times, some sub-tribes quarrelled and fought with other sub-tribes;
- There are stories of a traditional writing system that was eaten by animals, but up until very recently there was no Tangsa writing.

The linguistic ecology of the Tangsa has been altered in recent years by migration. As best we can tell, the traditional pattern of migration was that, when necessary, due to the demands of the shifting cultivation practices, or the ravages of conflict, some of the people from the 'home village' would shift to a new location. For generations, the direction of migration has been from the mountains of northern Sagaing district of Myanmar into the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh (India), and sometimes further down onto the plains, in Tinsukia district of Assam and the Kharsang area of Changlang district, Arunachal Pradesh.³¹

The first to arrive in India, some hundreds of years back, were the non-Pangwa Tikhak group, consisting of three large sub-tribes (Tikhak, Longchang, Yongkuk) and several smaller ones, including Kato. These

For example there is Tulim (Tonglum) village and nearby Lungri at the coordinates 363 and 111 (approx 96°50' East and 27°45' North). This map was produced in 1954, based on earlier maps including the British Government of India's *Survey of India* maps.

³¹ Almost all the villages in Kharsang are Tangsa, with Muklom and Mossang probably being the largest sub-tribes there. A large proportion of the population, however, is Chakma, Buddhist refugees from Bangladesh.

groups form a linguistic subgroup within Tangsa. Many of these people settled in the mountains of Changlang District and even on the plains of Assam, and their language is not intelligible by most other Tangsas (see Simai 2008, Hastie in preparation). There are no Tikhak group speakers in Myanmar.

A second group of non-Pangwa sub-tribes, including the Muklom and Hawoi, also arrived some hundreds of years ago.

The more recent migration by the Pangwa groups continues to the present day. Some of these groups, like the Joglei and Mossang (Mueshaungx), have been in India for a long time, are well established and plentiful; others, like the Chamchang and Cholim, have arrived much more recently.

Further non-Pangwa groups, like the Hakhun and Champang (whose languages are mutually unintelligible), have arrived in very recent times: the Hakhun village at Ledo has been largely settled since 1996, when we commenced our language work in Assam.

As already mentioned, many of the younger Tangsa people from different sub-tribes now communicate with each other in Assamese, as it is no longer easy for them to understand the range of Tangsa varieties.

3.2. LANGUAGE LOSS AMONG THE TANGSA. As far as we know, only two Tangsa varieties in India have become extinct.³² Hashak and Kato (though there is said to be still one family speaking Kato in Changlang town). Hashak is marked on the 1927 British map as Hashak Tangsa. Hashak village, which today is populated by Singpho-speaking Yongkuk people, was settled probably in the 19th century by a group who sought the permission of the local Singpho landowners to settle there.³³ We know nothing about the linguistic variety spoken by the Hashak, and perhaps it was not distinct from the present day Yongkuk population.

That said, there is clearly language loss going on. In the villages of Kharang Kong and Hewe Ninggam in Assam state, settled around 100 years ago mostly by Mossang (Mueshuangx) and Lochhang speakers, Singpho, a

³² Several more on the Myanmar side of the border have been identified (Bynn Kham Lann pers. comm.)

³³ The story of the Hashak settlement was told by a Singpho leader, the late Kiyang Laq (1916-2011), of Kumchai Kong village. It was in his grandfather's time that the Hashak came to Assam.

distantly related non-Tangsa but Tibeto-Burman language is now the mother tongue for most people. This represents a survival of an earlier situation where Singpho was the lingua franca of this part of Assam. In fact, the very first Tangsa person we encountered was a Singpho speaker who did not know his own ancestral Tangsa variety. These villages are situated on the plains in areas of great linguistic diversity, consisting of other tribal groups, speaking Tibeto-Burman and Tai languages, as well as communities of Nepalis, tea tribes (originally speakers of Austroasiatic languages), Biharis, Assamese-speaking Tai Ahoms and others. Now that Assamese has largely replaced Singpho as the lingua franca in this area, we might perhaps expect this group of people to gradually shift to Assamese.

This situation is quite different from where the majority of Tangsa live in Changlang district, where most villages are Tangsa, albeit linguistically diverse. It seems that geographical separation from these Tangsa-majority areas and the pressures of living in the more densely populated multilingual plains areas are leading to language loss.

On the other hand, almost all of the groups that have been longest in India (Tikhak, Longchang, Yongkuk, Muklom, Hawoi) and others still maintain their languages strongly, although there is some influence by outside linguistic factors, such as the use of more Singpho words in Tikhak – perhaps because Tikhak and Singpho are mostly followers of Theravada Buddhism, unlike most other Tangsa.

3.3. PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE. One of the most common requests we have received in the Tangsa area is to assist with the creation of a single ‘common language’. This is a desire stronger among some of the Christian Tangsa, motivated by a desire to have a single Bible translation and single hymn book to be used by all. In a certain sense, this follows the same idea as the Wihu song language – a unifying linguistic feature among the diverse spoken varieties. Reaching that unity, however, is proving challenging and elusive.

There are now three Bible translations underway among the Tangsa:

- Chamchang (Tangsa Baptist Churches Association, TBCA)
- Joglei (Presbyterian Church)
- Mossang (Hewa Naga Revival Church)

Chamchang had been accepted by many people as the ‘common language’ at least for Bible translation, but this has been challenged by both the Presbyterian Church and the Hewa Naga Revival Church. These challenges are largely based on linguistic considerations. The Presbyterian Church has been more successful converting Joglei and Ngaimong people, whose varieties are quite similar, but rather more distinct from Chamchang, so it is easy to see that Joglei would be a suitable language for use in that church.

The Mossang (Mueshaungx in their own orthography) are probably the largest sub-tribe in India and they broke away from the TBCA on the language issue, because they did not agree to use Chamchang as their language and have got their own Bible translation and literacy program underway.

There certainly is pressure from several directions for the Tangsa to develop a common language. It is hard to imagine an education system ever being possible in each of the 70 different varieties, especially when some of them are very similar to each other; yet in every village that we have ever visited, Tangsa people are very proud of their own sub-tribe and its own traditions and linguistic usage, so we think that the chances of a single variety becoming the ‘common language’ are slim.

However, there are some interesting signs. Consider the situation of Singpho, which is a spoken language related but not identical to the much larger Jinghpaw language, the official language of Kachin state in Myanmar. At least some of the younger Singphos in India now prefer to use written Jinghpaw rather than a form of their own spoken variety, because Jinghpaw has a large literature, larger population and some political sway. It is certainly possible to see that if, for example, the Chamchang variety reached the same position in Tangsa society as the written Jinghpaw has, people would gradually merge to it.

On the other hand, many Tangsa people, even members of the Tangsa Baptist Churches Association, have said that, while they will accept a single variety in church, they won’t change to using it in everyday speech. For example, the Hakhun, who are mostly Baptists and members of the TBCA, have recently produced their own books in a divergent orthography, exemplified in Figure 2:³⁴

³⁴ This was developed by Mr. Sujong Hakhun and Mr. Khithong Hakhun. While

Ti^ˆva^ˆ nøe^ˆ miq ni- yu^ˆbe^ˆ rung^ˆla^ˆ tung^ˆ t^ˆna^ˆ, ta^ˆni^ˆ va^ˆni^ˆ rwe^ˆyer^ˆ
a^ˆroq, Mun-ri^ˆt^ˆna^ˆ. I-røe^ˆ:ka^ˆmøe^ˆ ti^ˆka^ˆ vaq, k^ˆmøe^ˆ ma^ˆma^ˆ nøe- tung^ˆlat
na^ˆmøe^ˆ i-ruq, t^ˆni^ˆ va^ˆni^ˆ mik, nøe- ve^ˆ k^ˆmøe^ˆ ha^ˆni^ˆ mik, nøe- pat t^ˆna^ˆ.
I-røe^ˆ:ka^ˆmøe^ˆ ya^ˆka^ˆ yu^ˆbe^ˆ ni- miq lap :ki^ˆmun^ˆ miq na^ˆ. Nøe- mik nøe-
a^ˆlam^ˆ lam^ˆ møe^ˆ lap :ki^ˆkeq a^ˆna^ˆ a^ˆbøe^ˆ na^ˆ. Ha:kun^ˆ k^ˆmøe^ˆ i-ruk :pan^ˆ
keq.

FIGURE 2: Hakhun story written in Hakhun orthography

One more complication is that, some years ago, the Government decided that a Tangsa radio program should be broadcast on the Government radio. The variety chosen was Longchang, one of the Tikhak group of languages, mutually unintelligible with Chamchang.

We will conclude our discussion of Tangsa by mentioning one of the scripts that has been developed for use in all Tangsa varieties. Mr Lakhum Mossang of Namphai village has devised 73 characters which are exemplified in Table 5 (the font used here was developed by Paul Hastie).

ɹ	ᵛ	Low falling
ʌ	ᵛ	High Rising
ʌ	ᵛʔ	Glottal final
ʌ	ᵛ	High falling

TABLE 5: Lakhum Mossang's orthography

One important features of Lakhum Mossang's script that distinguishes it from all the Roman-based orthographies is that the vowel symbols also notate tone, as we see with each of the four examples in Table 5. In other words, it is impossible to write a word in this script which is not marked by tone.

differing significantly from other Tangsa orthographies, this is very similar to orthographies created by Baptist missionaries for other Tibeto-Burman languages, esp. Lahu and Akha, where the tonemarks come one space after the vowel.

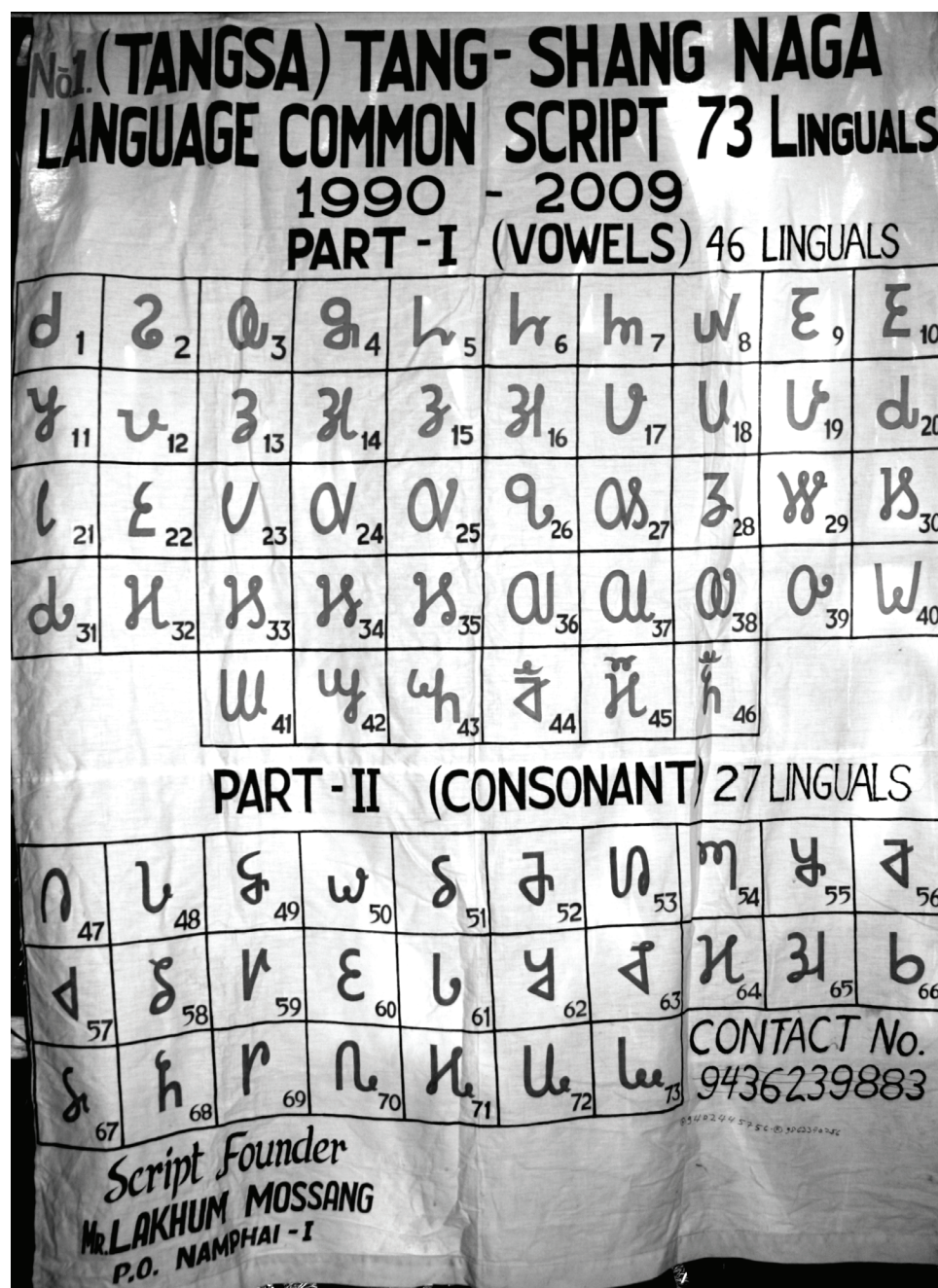


FIGURE 3: (Tangsa) Tang-Shang Naga Language Common Script, developed by Lakhum Mossang

There is controversy among the Tangsa as to whether this script should be adopted, but, to give the reader an idea of the work done by Lakhum Mossang, a full list of the characters in his script is given in Figure 3 above.

4. CONCLUSIONS. Speculation about why some languages survive and others do not is perhaps merely that, speculation. The two case studies that we have looked at in this paper do present a very substantial divergence. In the case of Tai Ahom, where the language was the court language of a kingdom, with written texts, an army, and a whole government and priestly caste, the language was nevertheless largely lost as a spoken language even before the Ahom kingdom itself was extinguished in the 1820s. A writing system, the political strength of the government and the prestige of having a dynasty dating back perhaps 600 years did not save the language from becoming moribund and ceasing to be used. What writing did do for Tai Ahom was to preserve a large array of texts on which a language and cultural revival can be based, and which can support the continuation of religious rituals.

We should mention that Tai Ahom is not the only language that has ceased to be spoken on the plains of Assam in recent centuries. Moran, a Boro-Garo language within Tibeto-Burman, was still spoken in Upper Assam into the 19th century but is now extinct; the Moran community is nevertheless still strong in Tinsukia district of Assam. On the other hand, there are languages that are spoken on the plains of Assam that have not become extinct in the same period, of which Boro is the most populous. Living on the plains and being in regular contact with Assamese speakers is thus not the only reason for language shift.

Tangsa, with a much smaller population, no political power, no writing until relatively recently and considerable linguistic diversity, nevertheless still shows language vitality in almost all of the varieties that we have investigated. In part, this situation can be explained in terms of hills versus plains. In the hills, where villages are more separated, where land is less suitable for intensive cultivation and where modern technology is less present, the linguistic diversity within Tangsa remains stronger. In these areas, most of the villages are Tangsa, and regular contact with non-Tangsa people is much less than in the plains areas.

We have seen that language loss is occurring in at least some of those

Tangsa communities that have moved to the plains of Assam – where most of the population are not Tangsa. These plains have long been very multicultural but they are now dominated by Assamese language, and Assamese³⁵ is the most common language of wider communication among Tangsa today. Writing is also now being introduced and its presence may or may not assist in the preservation of the existing diversity. Should one of the Bible orthographies become dominant, this might accelerate the loss of much of the existing diversity, perhaps with the benefit of strengthening the written variety. For some Tangsa people, such a single variety would represent greater unity and greater strength to withstand the inevitable cultural pressures to use languages of wider communication such as English, Hindi and Assamese. For others, it would represent the loss of a wonderful diversity.

It is hoped that these detailed case studies will assist in understanding the factors involved in language loss.

5. ACCESSING OUR DATA. Our raw data can be found in several locations. Firstly, most of our Tangsa and Ahom recordings and photographs are archived at the DoBeS archive, maintained by the Max Planck Institute in Nijmegen. The address for the MPI is corpus1.mpi.nl/ds/imdi_browser/. After opening that, click on *DoBeS archive* and then on *Tangsa, Tai, Singpho in North East India* to access our data.

Linguistic transcriptions of the Tangsa and Ahom materials are also being made available, in searchable format, via SEALANG at <http://sealang.net/assam>. Word documents with transcriptions are also available for download there. The searchable Ahom Dictionary is found at <http://sealang.net/ahom>.

Photographs of the Ahom manuscripts are being archived at the British Library Endangered Archives Programme (<http://eap.bl.uk/>).

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³⁵ The Assamese used by Tangsa people varies from quite close to standard, to pidginised forms that are sometimes grouped together under the designation of Nagamese. It would indeed be worthwhile to make a deeper, cross-generational study of the Assamese in use by Tangsa people, but this has been well beyond the scope of any of our researches to this point.

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Script as a potential demarcator and stabilizer of languages in South Asia

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South Asia is rich not only in languages, but also in scripts. However, the various roles script can play in this region have been only marginally explored. Besides an overview of the most important examples from South Asia in which script has contributed to the strengthening or weakening of a language, or to the classification of a tongue as a language or dialect, this paper offers first inputs for a discussion on the role of script today in smaller speech communities which lack a long literary tradition. Especially in cases of script invention, script is not only allocated the role of an identity marker for the speech community, but seems to be expected to strengthen the language itself, and finally to act as a preserver of the minority language.

1. INTRODUCTION. Given that South Asia is the region with the highest density of scripts in use, it is not surprising that script plays an outstanding sociolinguistic role in that part of the world. Among the South Asian states, India hosts the majority of these scripts. On current Indian rupee notes

alone, we can find ten scripts¹ corresponding to the 22 languages² listed in the Eighth Schedule³ of the Indian Constitution plus the Roman script, which is used not only for English but also for languages of South Asian origin such as Konkani and Santali.⁴ Additionally, there are other scripts which have either official status only in a state of the Indian Union but not at the national level, or no official status at all but nonetheless play a major or minor role in the daily life of people. Though other South Asian countries host far fewer scripts, or can even be considered monoscriptal (e.g. Pakistan), it is still necessary to consider the Indian Subcontinent as a whole. Some languages are spoken in more than one country and, sometimes, only by analyzing their situations across state borders can the importance of script be revealed; that is the case of Punjabi, for instance, which shall be discussed in this article. I argue that script in South Asia is an important identity marker for many speech communities; it can play a role, above all, in demarcating languages from each other, and might thus even prevent a language from being categorized as a dialect of another language. Furthermore, a unique script can contribute to stabilizing a language with regard to its literary production and functional role. While these functions seem to be true for major South Asian languages, as will become apparent below, agents of smaller languages have also discovered the potential of script. This has led to the invention and rediscovery of scripts for various languages over the last century. This paper gives an overview of the various roles script can play in South Asia, and queries whether script can also be instrumental in stabilizing minor South Asian languages.

¹ The following scripts feature on the Indian currency note: the Assamese/Bengali script and the Gujarati, Kannada, Malayalam, Oriya, Gurmukhi, Tamil, and Telugu scripts. Kashmiri and Urdu are represented by variants of the Perso-Arabic script, whereas Hindi, Konkani, Marathi, Nepali, and Sanskrit by Nagari.

² The following languages (spelt here according to the Indian Constitution) are listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution: Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santhali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu (Government of India 2008: 330); of those, the following languages are not yet represented on the Indian currency note: Bodo, Dogri, Maithili, Manipuri, Santhali, and Sindhi.

³ Languages which are listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution are entitled to state support in various fields, e.g. subsidies for printing books and the preparation of textbooks for schools.

⁴ For the sake of readability, I will use anglicized transcriptions of South Asian language and script names.

2. THE GURMUKHI SCRIPT: DEMARCATING AND STRENGTHENING PUNJABI.

One of the most prominent examples of the importance of script refers to a language which is native to India and Pakistan. Punjabi, an Indo-Aryan language, is spoken mainly in the region of Punjab, which, since 1947 (the year of British India's independence and the creation of the state of Pakistan), has been divided between these two countries. While religion was the driving force in establishing Pakistan as a state for the Muslims of British India (whose leaders feared discrimination in a Hindu-majority India), the distribution of the three writing variants of Punjabi – Nagari,⁵ a variant of the Perso-Arabic script and Gurmukhi – is today also based mainly on religious differences. Gurmukhi, a modified Landa script, is currently associated exclusively with Punjabi, but the origin of this script owes to the formation of a new religion, which we nowadays know as Sikhism. Sikhism is strongly influenced by Sufism and other local religious forms today mostly categorized under Hinduism (cf. Oberoi 1995). In addition to the central role of a Guru (ten altogether), the preference for religious teachings in local languages was another notable feature. At that time (15th-17th century), Sikh gurus used this practice in order to be more in line with Sufism, and with Bhakti movements which constitute devotional forms of Hinduism. From today's perspective, Sikhism could easily have been subsumed under these categories as well had it not been for its holy book.

In the holy book of the Sikhs – the *Adi Granth* – we find hymns composed in several languages, for instance Braj Bhasha, Hindi, Persian and Sanskrit, but overwhelmingly Sadhukkari, and only to a lesser extent Punjabi (Wessler 2009: 92). It was the Gurmukhi script chosen by the second Sikh guru, Angad (1504-1552), which actually helped this new religion to demarcate itself from other religious movements. In hindsight, the use of the Gurmukhi script seems to be one of the most important decisions for the consolidation of the Sikh religion. Pashaura Singh comments on it:

⁵ Also referred to as “Devanagari”. By using the term “Nagari”, I follow authors like King (1994) and Rai (2001). The main reason for preferring Nagari over Devanagari is that, though Devanagari is used in manuscriptology to differentiate this Northern script style from the Southern Nandinagari, in modern terminology the term *deva* (Sanskrit ‘god, godly’) has been applied to *nāgarī*, the name form common previously, to give this script a divine aura (resulting from the nearly exclusive Western Orientalist use of Nagari to print Sanskrit) and hence a status of superiority in relation to other scripts in India.

The use of the Gurmukhi script added an element of demarcation and self-identity to the Sikh tradition. In fact, language became the single most important factor in the preservation of Sikh culture and identity and became the cornerstone of the religious distinctiveness that is part and parcel of the Sikh cultural heritage. (Singh 2004: 81f.)

Interestingly, and even though the *Adi Granth* combines several languages (as detailed above), Singh here equates script with language, thus providing an unconscious example of one of the widespread identity-creating functions of script in South Asia. Indeed, in the course of time, Gurmukhi has become intrinsically linked to the native language of the overwhelming majority of Sikhs, namely Punjabi.

With around 60 million speakers⁶ (44.15 percent of Pakistan's population, cf. Government of Pakistan 1998a, 1998b), today Punjabi is for the larger part spoken in Pakistan, where it is written in a variant of the Perso-Arabic script called *Shahmukhi* – literally 'from the Shah's mouth'. In India, it is the native language of barely 30 million people (Government of India 2001) who mostly write it in Gurmukhi, whereas only a minority of Punjabi Hindus uses the Nagari script for Punjabi (if they write in this language at all). We can only speculate about what the present situation of Punjabi in South Asia would have been without the introduction of Gurmukhi. But, judging from today's situation of Punjabi in Pakistan, we can at least get a glimpse of a possible scenario. Despite the fact that the largest number of Punjabi native speakers live in Pakistan, Sabiha Mansoor (1993: 126f.), for example, points out that Punjabi mother tongue students tend to neglect their mother language, which many consider to be inferior to Urdu, the national language of Pakistan. This condition is mainly caused by the exclusivist language policy of the Pakistani state, which leaves little space for other languages (cf. Ayres 2009) even though Urdu is spoken natively by less than 8% of its population (Government of Pakistan 1998b) – primarily by the so-called *Muhajirs*, i.e. descendants of people who migrated to this part of South Asia from Urdu-speaking regions of India, mostly during the partition of 1947. On the one hand, Urdu serves as a *lingua franca* in multilingual Pakistan

⁶ This figure is based on official data of the Government of Pakistan derived from the 1998 census. By now, the number of Punjabi mother tongue speakers must have increased, considering the high population growth in general. This is also the case for the figures of language speakers taken from the Indian census of 2001.

but, on the other hand, it also degrades other languages due to the lack of official recognition and public support for these. In India, by contrast, besides the eminent role language and script play for Sikhs (who, nowadays, predominantly live in India), another important step for establishing Punjabi as a vibrant functional language was its declaration as an official language of the newly created state of Punjab in 1966. Until then, Urdu had been the main language of administration as well as education in this part of the Punjab, but now, on the back of government support, it was replaced with Punjabi written in Gurmukhi (Jeffrey 1997: 444).

Although India's language policy is obviously more inclusive than that of Pakistan, I argue that it was the Gurmukhi script that made it possible for Punjabi to attain its present-day status in India. Compared to Muslim Punjabi speakers in Pakistan, who do not use their language as proudly as Sikh speakers in India, Punjabi in India is not only considered an important part of Sikh religion and culture, it is also gaining steadily in popularity even outside of its community, for instance through usage in Bollywood songs. Moreover, without Gurmukhi, Punjabi ran the risk of being categorized as a dialect of another language (viz. Hindi), and, in this sense, the script led to its fixation as an independent language. By contrast, the language of the Hindus in the region has been officially classified as a dialect of Hindi. As this example shows, Hindi is not unreasonably considered by many to be a threat to other languages.

3. URDU: LANGUAGE WEAKENING DUE TO SCRIPT POLITICS. Urdu is the prime example of a language in India whose functional role has suffered due to the rise of Hindi as we know it today (cf. Oesterheld 2006).⁷ The genesis of this development can be traced back to the 19th century (cf. King 1994). As with many other processes of identity formation, the 19th century was decisive for the growing importance of script. Various factors which served the purpose of creating and strengthening the idea of a nation gained

⁷ While promoting Hindi in the form of Khari Boli as a "national" language, the official language policy in India continues to apply the term "Hindi" to other languages as well. Through this subsumption of the old terminology for a group of related languages under the new terminology relating to one particular language, all the other languages have effectively been relegated to the status of dialects (and thus sub-standard forms) of Khari Boli-Hindi, which is now also referred to as "Standard" or "Modern Hindi".

in relevance during the time of national awakening in colonial India. In this process, script attained an unprecedented significance with the increasing importance of formal education, literacy, history in general and, above all, the history of literature. The increasing importance of script in British India eventually led to the separation of Hindi and Urdu, based first and foremost on their diverging scripts. The Perso-Arabic script, the dominant script for the language known under several terms – for instance Hindi, Hindustani and Urdu – was identified as foreign and Muslim, whereas the Nagari script served the demands of the awakened Hindi-speaking Hindu elite in search of an authentic Indian identity.

The history of the separation of Hindi and Urdu is well documented and shall not be repeated here, but, in the context of this article, it must be noted that the rise of Hindi in Nagari script enriched with Sanskrit vocabulary took place to the detriment of Urdu. Urdu today is far from being a dying language due to its high number of mother tongue speakers in India and its dominant status as a national language in Pakistan. Yet, the production of literature in this language and, above all, its functional role has been on a steady decline in India (especially in the birth region of Urdu) ever since the Nagari script de facto replaced the Perso-Arabic script in many domains (cf. Orsini 2002). The dominance of Nagari as the script for the language formerly known as Hindi, Urdu or Hindustani, which facilitated the rise of Modern Hindi as we know it today in independent India, can indeed be considered the main reason for the decline of Urdu as a literary and functional language in India. A further reason might be seen in the usage of Nagari for texts hitherto available only or primarily in the Perso-Arabic script; this can, though it need not, lead to a reclassification of Urdu texts as Hindi literature.

4.1. SCRIPT AS A DEMARCATOR BETWEEN LANGUAGES. While Hindi and Urdu have a single origin and are justly called by many scholars one language with two scripts (cf. King 1994),⁸ they are officially listed as two separate languages by the Indian state. However, other languages that share

⁸ In addition to the diverging scripts, the vocabulary of Hindi and Urdu vary at the formal level. Hindi prefers words of Sanskrit origin, while Urdu draws extensively from Perso-Arabic and, in a few cases, Turkic sources. However, in daily life, speakers of both languages might not even realize that they speak two “different” languages.

the same script with Hindi, such as Awadhi, Bhojpuri or Braj Bhasha, are today classified as dialects of Hindi, though they have their own literary history and, unlike Urdu, differ from Modern Hindi in grammar and syntax. Another language which was for a long time categorized as a dialect of Hindi is Maithili (Mishra 1976: 19f.). It was only in 2003, after long agitations by Maithili supporters, that it was listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and thus gained official status as a language. Though the fact that nowadays these four languages share the same script with Hindi is certainly not the only reason why they are/were categorized as dialects, this circumstance has surely made it easier. In Nepal, by contrast, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Hindi are officially classed as different languages.

In this context, one could also point to Gujarati, which, written in its own script, is classified as a language in its own right, whereas the allied speeches of Rajasthan, today usually written in the Nagari script, are considered to be dialects⁹ of Hindi (in the Indian census, for instance) despite the fact that they are linguistically closer to Gujarati.

The obvious endeavors of the Indian state to declare as many languages as possible to be dialects of Hindi – in order to strengthen the numerical basis of Hindi and hence the case for its potential role as the national language – constitute a special case. But other examples show how a language which is contiguous to another language with a strong literary tradition (real or constructed), and with which it shares the same script, often comes to be referred to as a dialect of the dominant language.

4.2. THE CASE OF KONKANI AND MARATHI. Konkani, an Indo-Aryan language with around 2.5 million native speakers (Government of India 2001), is the official language of the Indian Union state of Goa, which was a Portuguese overseas territory until 1961. Although Goa is the bastion of Konkani, it is also spoken in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala. Because of the scattered distribution of Konkani and the various religious affiliations

⁹ In the 2001 Indian census, languages which feature in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution are listed as main categories, while languages without independent status are categorized as “mother tongues” of these languages, e.g. Rajasthani and Marwari are called “mother tongues” of Hindi. Notably, Hindi has 49 (+ others) mother tongues, whereas Gujarati has only 3 (+ others). Interestingly, the term “dialect” is avoided in these listings, though the systematization actually points out that “mother tongue” is here rather used as a synonym for “dialect”.

of its speakers, it is written in several scripts (though religious demarcations are not as strict as implied here): in the Nagari script by Hindus in Goa and Maharashtra, in the Kannada script in Karnataka, in the Malayalam script in Kerala, in the Roman script by Christians particularly in Goa, and in a variant of the Perso-Arabic script by Muslims in Kerala.

Goa was dominated for centuries by the Portuguese, resulting in the spread of the Portuguese language and a neglect of Konkani, which was, additionally, furthered by the dominance of Marathi in the religious literature of Goan Hindus. Nevertheless, Konkani has a long literary tradition of its own (cf. Gomes 1997), which provided an important argument for a Konkani agitation from the beginning of the 20th century onwards. After Goa's independence from Portugal in the 1960s, this movement gained momentum. At that time, the biggest opponent of Konkani became Marathi. Marathi supporters have been claiming to this day that Konkani is nothing but one of its dialects, backing this with the fact that most Hindus in Goa use Nagari and, additionally, have a good command of Marathi. After Konkani was officially recognized as an independent language in 1975 by the Sahitya Akademi, India's national literature academy, it became the official language of Goa (in the Nagari script) in 1987. Nowadays, Konkani and its literature in various scripts is in a rather poor state due to the pressure of Marathi and English, which are indispensable for social upward mobility, and the lack of education opportunities in Konkani. However, its inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 1992 ensures state sponsorship and its continuing status as an independent language – though predominantly for Konkani in Nagari, according to Konkani activists advocating other scripts (Menezes 2012).

4.3. BENGALI AND ITS 'DIALECTS'. Bengali is the dominant language in the eastern part of South Asia, taking into account its rich literary history and its role as a vital functional language. Although it is spoken mainly in Bangladesh and the Indian Union state of West Bengal, its geographical spread extends far beyond these modern state borders. For instance, Tripura is also predominantly Bengali-speaking. Its script is officially classified as "Bengali" by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO)¹⁰

¹⁰ The script, which is used for several languages such as Assamese, Bengali and Bishnupriya, has an entry in the online list of *Codes for the representation of names of*

despite the fact that other languages are also written in the same script. Some minor differences notwithstanding, Assamese, for example, shares the same script with Bengali and, under British rule, was at first classified as a dialect of it regardless of its own rich literary tradition. George Abraham Grierson stated that the literary tradition of Assamese was the main argument in favor of classifying it at last as an independent language, even though he claimed that, linguistically, it was indeed a dialect of Bengali (Grierson 1968: 393f.).

Other languages which are often considered to be dialects of Bengali include Bishnupriya and Chakma. Both are Indo-Aryan languages related to Assamese and Bengali and spoken in various parts of North East India and Bangladesh. They are predominantly written in the same script as Assamese and Bengali, although Chakma has an own script.¹¹ Nonetheless, Grierson classified Chakma as a Bengali dialect in his *Linguistic Survey of India* (Grierson 1968: 321). Whereas Chakma is still officially categorized as a Bengali “mother tongue” in the Indian census (Government of India 2001), i.e. as a dialect (see footnote 9), it has successfully shaken off this classification in Bangladesh, seemingly also by emphasizing possession of its own script. Chakma in its unique script is said to have been reintroduced first of all in non-government schools in Bangladesh; however, published sources on this are missing. After the language and its script were also introduced in schools in Chakma areas of the Indian Union state of Mizoram, the government of the state of Tripura also decided to introduce this script for Chakma schools in 2012 (Anonymous 2012). Script, in this case, serves not only as an important identity marker, but also as a demarcator from the dominant languages of the region, and maybe, ultimately, as a stabilizer of the Chakma language; but the standard of literacy in the Chakma script seems to be still too low, in Bangladesh as well as in India, to draw any conclusions.

5. MEITEI: THE REVIVAL OF A UNIQUE SCRIPT. It is similarly difficult to predict the consequences of the introduction of the Meitei Mayek script for Meitei in the Indian Union state of Manipur. Meitei or Meiteilon (officially: Manipuri), a Sino-Tibetan language with around 1.5 million mother tongue

scripts of the International Organization for Standardization under the name Bengali (code: Beng; number: 325), while there is no entry for Assamese in the list.

¹¹ For an introduction to the Chakma script, see e.g. Grierson (1968: 321-323).

speakers (Government of India 2001), is not only the most widely spoken language but also the lingua franca of Manipur. Although Meitei has not been categorized as a dialect of another language, it is nonetheless considered to be under permanent pressure from the dominant languages of North East India – Assamese and Bengali. In addition to Bengali loanwords in modern Meitei, another important argument in this regard is that the Bengali script was allegedly forced upon the Meitei language from the beginning of the 18th century. The introduction of the Bengali script ultimately led to the disappearance of the Meitei script (Aggarwal 1997: 444).

Since the 1930s, various agents have been trying to re-establish a script for Meitei based on the old Meitei Mayek script but, to this day, the various lobby groups do not agree on the number of letters.¹² Although the Manipur state government has approved the Meitei Mayek with 27 letters and introduced it widely in school textbooks from 2005 onwards, one consequence of the ongoing controversy is that Meitei and its script have not yet been included on the Indian currency note (Singh 2011: 28), even though Meitei was listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution already in 1992 – as Manipuri, which continues to be its official designation. The revival of a unique script and the renaming of Meitei as Manipuri serve the purpose of strengthening Meitei nationalism under the cloak of Manipuri identity, which might, in the long run, lead to the decline of other languages spoken in the linguistically heterogeneous state of Manipur.

The dominance of Meitei and its script is already contested by several other language groups. For instance, the relabelling of Meitei as Manipuri was strongly opposed by speakers of the Indo-Aryan language Bishnupriya. Bishnupriya lobbyists argued that theirs was the true Manipuri language, and Meitei was only Meitei. One reason for the success of Meitei in this dispute was its higher number of native speakers. For Bishnupriya, only 77,545 mother language speakers are listed in the Indian census of 2001. The implementation of Meitei Mayek in Manipur in 2005 was opposed, among others, by the All Naga Students Association of Manipur (ANSAM), whose members feared that the script might also be forced upon them (Laithangbam 2005). Other languages in Manipur are still written mainly in

¹² For more details regarding the controversy on the number of letters in the Meitei Mayek see Singh (2011), which includes samples of the 18 (ibid.: 26) and 27 (ibid.: 29) letter script.

the Roman script, but also in the Bengali script. The overall implementation of the Meitei Mayek would, on the one hand, give the peoples of Manipur a distinct identity and emphasize their uniqueness in contrast to the dominant Assamese and Bengali cultures. On the other hand, however, it would give Meitei an even more important role than it already has, thus contributing to the degradation of other languages written in the Bengali and Roman scripts.

Today, Meitei is, besides English, the only official language of Manipur, and one can observe a growing trend of teaching it in Meitei Mayek in government schools, as well as the emergence of this script in the public sphere. The state-sponsored spread of the Meitei Mayek in Manipur might lead, in the near future, to a scenario in which Meitei plays the role not only of a dominant but also of a dominating language, and the languages of ethnic minorities might be even more neglected. Furthermore, since Meitei is a rather unimportant language at the national level, students who wish to pursue higher education and obtain jobs in administration will still need to learn an additional language and script, such as Bengali, English or Hindi. This could ultimately lead native speakers of minority languages, who strive for social upward mobility, to neglect their mother tongue. The strengthening of Meitei, with the help of a unique script, could hence encourage the demise of minority languages in Manipur, especially the already endangered languages of the hill tribes.

6. WRITING AND SCRIPT AS SYMBOLS OF ‘HIGH CULTURE’. Groups which are labeled as “tribes”¹³ often fear the loss of their languages as well as other parts of their cultures, and hence search for ways to strengthen their identities. The most important factors to demarcate one group from another are not only real or perceived present-day differences, but also a real or constructed history which is not shared with any other group. While so-called tribes often center their uniqueness around religious and cultural rituals, festivals and narratives of origin, in the last hundred years language and, above all, written texts have also gained in importance. The search

¹³ The term “tribe” is highly contested by many people labeled as “tribals” as well as by scholars, who point out that this was a category introduced by the British (cf. Jain 2005). Nonetheless, it is still an official category in India, as in “Scheduled Tribe”, which is why I use it, especially in the context of language politics.

for a written literary history among minorities which so far only had oral literary traditions can be observed in various regions of South Asia today. For instance, during his field studies in North East India, Stuart Blackburn observed that several tribes, including the Bodos, tell their very own story of lost writing.¹⁴ While such stories vary in extent and detail, they all seem to serve the same purpose: to compensate for a feeling of inferiority for lacking a written tradition like other surrounding cultures. Blackburn states that

[a]lthough the story [of lost writing] claims possession of writing in the past, it is really about loss in the present, a feeling of exclusion from dominant neighbors, who have now become nation-states. It is a local and oral counterpoint to the official and written list of the national languages. (Blackburn 2010: 309)

More and more so-called tribes compensate for this feeling of inferiority not only with stories of lost writing, but also with the invention of their very own scripts.

6.1. SANTALI AND ITS INVENTED SCRIPT. The most prominent example of script invention among the so-called tribes of South Asia is that of Santali, which has around 6.5 million speakers (Government of India 2001). In the course of history, the Santals not only settled in several Indian states, but can today also be found in Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Literacy was spread only in the 19th century among them by missionaries who printed the first Santali publications, such as the Bible, in the Roman script. Nowadays, Santali is written also in the Ol Chiki, Nagari, Bengali and Oriya scripts. The use of the last three depends on the dominant language and script of the respective country or Indian Union state (Murmu 2002: 242).

Santali is an Austro-Asiatic language with a phonology different from that of the languages from which it has borrowed these scripts. In 1941, the Santal nationalist and linguist Raghunath Murmu created a script exclusively for Santali (Singh 1982: 237) – the Ol or Ol Chiki script (also Ol Cemet), which is, in contrast to most Indian scripts, an alphabetic and not a syllabic script. It seems obvious that, besides the allegedly more accurate

¹⁴ For examples, see Blackburn (2008) and Gaenzle (2007).

rendering of the Santali phonemes, the choice of this writing system was also influenced by the currency of the alphabetic Roman script among the Santals. But the invention of this new script served yet another purpose:

The introduction of Ol Chiki could serve as a link among Santals of various states who had a common distinct culture which faces the danger of extinction. (Singh 1982: 239)

Additionally, with this new script Raghunath Murmu also laid the foundation for a distinctive written literary tradition which he himself started with several publications, including mythological stories of the Santals (Lotz 2007: 235).

As he [Raghunath Murmu] saw it, every respectable high-culture language in India has its own distinct script and an old (written) literature. (Zide 1969: 425)

Since then, many educated Santal activists have been trying to establish Ol Chiki as the only script for Santali in the whole of India; Santals in other countries seem to be excluded from these endeavors. But even in India only a small number accept the Ol Chiki script, for various reasons. Barbara Lotz wrote about the diverse formal difficulties in implementing Ol Chiki in Orissa, but also about the reservations of Santals themselves against the script and against Santali in general:

[T]he imposition of the mother tongue (plus script!) [...] is perceived as an instrument of further marginalization by the learners, who feel they are put to an even more disadvantaged position in view of the additional language burden, as they will eventually have to cope with three languages: Oriya, Hindi and English. The introduction of the tribal mother tongue is acceptable for the learners only as an initial bridge medium of instruction; if it extends to a full course including script, grammar and literature, hardly any learner is willing to devote much time for it, especially as no job market is available for this specialized knowledge. (Lotz 2004: 136f.)

Although the West Bengal government recognized Ol Chiki as the script for Santali as early as 1981 (Singh 1982: 239), a similar situation applies in this part of India as well as in Bihar and Jharkhand. In addition to the general lack of educational opportunities for Santali in Ol Chiki, the reservations of

Santali speakers against this script are overwhelming, and therefore they continue to write Santali in its various other scripts – Bengali, Nagari, Oriya and Roman.

The situation regarding Santali and its scripts in the various Indian Union states is the reason why, like Meitei, Santali still does not feature on the Indian currency note despite the fact that it was listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 2003. Nonetheless, the Ol Chiki project of Raghunath Murmu still seems partly successful due to the continuous production of books and magazines in this script – even though only on a low level. But only an in-depth study and future developments will be able to tell us more.

6.2. OTHER HISTORIC EXAMPLES OF SCRIPT INVENTION. Other well-known examples of script invention in the 20th century include the Ho language and the claim of an old script (nowadays known as Varang Kshiti) which was said to have been re-discovered in the 1950s by Lakho Bodra, a Ho himself and a driving figure of Ho nationalism (Singh 1982: 240f.). For Gondi, a Dravidian language, a script was invented in 1928 (Pandey 2012: 1), and for Sora, an Austro-Asiatic language, a script called Sorang Sompeng in 1936. In contrast to Santali, the endeavors to establish the scripts for Ho, Gondi and Sora have been comparatively unsuccessful until now (Daniels 2008: 305). There seem to be neither a considerable production of literature in these scripts, nor movements in their support worth mentioning. Santali, with its invented script, and Meitei, with its revived script, seem to be exceptions rather than the rule.

6.3. SCRIPT INVENTION TODAY. There is a lack of studies on recent script inventions, which makes it necessary to rely mostly on internet sources in order to get an impression of recent initiatives. This short overview hence does not claim to be complete, and it is impossible at this moment to predict whether the activities described will have any impact at all. Nonetheless, it indicates that the idea of script as an identity marker seems to experience unbroken popularity in South Asia, especially in India. But whereas in the past the main actors in the field of script invention/revival were the language communities in question, nowadays supporters and initiators come from diverse backgrounds.

One activist in the field of script inventions is Prasanna Sree. According to an online newspaper article (Vishnu 2010), she comes from a tribal community but is socially and economically well-off, and is today a professor of English Literature at Andhra University in Visakhapatnam (Andhra Pradesh). In addition to her university position, she also engages in activities for the welfare of various small tribes. In a newspaper interview about her endeavors to preserve the languages of various tribal groups, i.e. Adivasis¹⁵, she stated in 2010:

Adivasis have always waited on the threshold of progress. All outsiders who have conquered them have made Adivasis run from themselves. English education is the latest culprit. I devised scripts for something Adivasis desperately need – a cultural renaissance. (Vishnu 2010)

So far, Prasanna Sree has devised 18 scripts which are given on her website (Sree n.d.). Some remind us of existing scripts, while others seem to be based on completely new designs. Sree claims that some scripts are already taught in various tribal villages. According to the article quoted above, the Gondis were especially eager to demand the approval of their language and own script, modified by Sree, by the government of Andhra Pradesh and its introduction in schools, in 2010.

In the same article, we learn about another supporter of minority languages who, according to this and another article (Sunavala 2012), has created scripts for 11 languages which had only oral traditions until then. Ganesh Devy (Ganesh N. Devy or G. N. Devy) is a prominent scholar of English Literature from Gujarat, where he has also established the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre aimed at the preservation of small, previously strictly oral languages. Devy's scripts, in contrast with Sree's, are very close to the Nagari and Gujarati scripts. He defended his choice in an interview: "Scripts are not sacred. Language scripts are like a

¹⁵ The term "Adivasi" refers to groups which are officially listed as "Scheduled Tribes" in India. While currently the term "tribe" may bear a rather negative connotation, "Adivasi" (e.g. Hindi: *ādivāsī*, Bengali: *ādibāsī*, literally 'original inhabitant') is often preferred by Scheduled Tribes as a self-affiliation, especially in the field of rights discourses. However, the term is not accepted by most ethnic groups in North East India, who prefer to refer to themselves as "tribes" or only by their group names.

camera. The language is what forms a universe.” In the interview he also pointed out that Ol Chiki for Santali “took nearly a century to reach its currently thriving state” and Prasanna Sree’s “scripts will face just as many challenges” (Vishnu 2010). Unfortunately, an overview of his scripts is not available online but, judging from written samples of the tribal languages Devy publishes on the website of the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, we get the impression that these, e.g. Ahirani, Chaudhuri, Dehwali, Dungri Bhili, etc., are written in Nagari or Gujarati script, or maybe slightly modified variants (Anonymous n.d.).

In North East India, the Naga Script Literature Central Board (NSLCB) came forward with an invented Naga script in 2010. Allegedly, this script was revealed by a person called Laokeinang Phaomi in 1958 (Shapwon 2007: 120f.). One supporter claimed that this script “could be a bond to unify all Nagas scattered all over the country and beyond” (Anonymous 2010a). This statement reminds us of the invention of the Ol Chiki script for Santali. But, while the Santals form an ethnic group, though not as homogeneous as imagined, “Naga” is a label for a range of diverse ethnic groups in Northeast India that speak diverse languages and use a hitherto non-standardized (but relatively stable) creole based on Assamese (often called Nagamese) to communicate among each other. Hence, the implementation of this script will be rather difficult, and was criticized by members of other Naga groups – by Konyaks (Anonymous 2010b) and Kyongs (Anonymous 2010c) – only a few weeks after the plans of the NSLCB were made public.

A similarly difficult situation occurs in Arunachal Pradesh, where Tony Koyu designed a script for the various languages of this Indian Union state. He unveiled the Tani Lipi script in 2001 and, since then, has gained attention from the media, scholars (cf. Barbora & Post 2008) and representatives of the government of Arunachal Pradesh (Taikam 2010). The main aim behind the development of this script is that of strengthening the bond between the various ethnic groups by providing at least a common script for their diverse languages. The project has received positive as well as negative reactions from various groups and individuals and has, probably for that reason, not yet been officially approved. Until now, it seems to have been implemented only by smaller, privately financed initiatives.

Tim Brookes, an American script enthusiast who runs a website called Endangered Alphabets, launched a project called Endangered Alphabets II:

Saving Languages in Bangladesh, which aims at printing children's books in languages and scripts from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, i.e. "Mro, Marma, Tripura, Chakma and others" (Brookes 2012). In order to raise funds, he asked for support via the social fund-raising website Kickstarter and managed to collect 11,051 dollars donated by 266 people (ibid.). On his Kickstarter page, we read the following:

Now a new and urgent Endangered Alphabets situation has arisen, in a region of southern Bangladesh called the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This upland and forested area is home to 13 different indigenous peoples, each of which has its own genetic identity, its history and cultural traditions, and many of which their own language and even their own script. (Brookes 2012)

7. SUMMARY. The recent script initiatives listed above show that script still has and may even have been gaining more importance in the last decades. In general, the endeavors of so-called tribes in South Asia for their own script, and ultimately an individual literary history, seem to serve three purposes. On the one hand, an ethnic group without a literary tradition often seems, from today's perspective, an incomplete nation, so various so-called tribes have tried and still try to compensate for this by creating or searching for their own written texts. A literary tradition in a unique script appears to fulfill the alleged demands of a "high culture" entirely, at least in South Asia, where many rich literary languages have their own script. Santali, with its script Ol Chiki, is a prominent example of this function. Interestingly, supporters external to these communities have recently joined in, such as Prasanna Sree among tribes mainly in Andhra Pradesh, or Tim Brookes among ethnic minorities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh.

Secondly, a specific literary tradition can help to demarcate one language from another, and ultimately even stabilize it as a vibrant literary and functional language. The case of Chakma – a language often still considered to be a dialect of Bengali – is an interesting example whose recent developments need to be studied in depth.

A third, and quite recent, purpose for the invention of scripts is that script may serve as a unifier of various ethnic groups in either a single Indian Union state, such as Arunachal Pradesh, or an imagined community consisting of several ethnic groups, such as the Nagas. Here, script is

expected to play an integrative role on a sub-national level, in opposition to scripts which are already associated with strong identities of other dominant groups, examples being the Assamese and Bengali scripts associated with Assamese and Bengali ethnicity in North East India; the Roman script with Christianity; and Nagari with Hindi, which aspires to national language status in India and privileged association with Sanskrit and thus Hinduism.

It is evident that script is a very important identity marker for a host of ethnic groups in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal.¹⁶ What role scripts will finally play for them depends on various factors, such as acceptance by community members, compatibility with the languages, non-governmental support or, and above all, governmental support.

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¹⁶ Though I abstain in this article from listing examples from Nepal, there are several interesting cases of script invention and revival in that country, including the Akkha, Jenticha, Kirat Rai, Limbu, and Tikamuli scripts.

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The lifecycle of Sri Lanka Malay

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The aim of this paper is to document the forces that led first to the decay and then the revival of the ancestral language of the Malay diaspora of Sri Lanka. We first sketch the background of the origins of the language in terms of intense contact and multilingual transfer; then analyze the forces that led to a significant language shift and consequent loss, as well as the factors responsible for the recent survival of the language. In doing so we focus in particular on the ideologies of language upheld within the community, as well as on the role of external agents in the lifecycle of the community.

1. THE FORMATIVE PERIOD. The community of Malays in Sri Lanka¹ is the result of the central practices of Western colonialism, namely the displacement of subjects from one colonized region to another. Through various waves of deportation communities of people from Indonesia (the

¹Fieldwork undertaken in February and December 2003 and January 2004 in Colombo, Hambantota and Kirinda was partially supported by a National University of Singapore Academic Research Grant (R-103-000-020-112) for the project *Contact languages of Southeast Asia: The role of Malay* (Principal investigator: Umberto Ansaldo). Research from August 2004 to 2008 was funded by the Volkswagen Stiftung's initiative for the Docu-

Dutch East Indies) and Malaysia were settled on the island. It is possible that the community based in the Slave Island district in Colombo may have been there during Portuguese rule (until 1656), but the bulk of the Sri Lanka Malays trace their ancestry to the communities brought over during Dutch rule (1656-1796) and during British rule (1796-1948) (Hussainmiya 1987).

1.1. THE PEOPLE. While referred to homogeneously as ‘Sri Lanka Malays’, their origins are in fact very heterogeneous, covering an area from Malaysia to the easternmost provinces of Indonesia (Hussainmiya 1987, 1990). Naturally, their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds are similarly extremely diverse. Under the Dutch, political exiles, as well as convicts, were deported to Ceylon from different corners of the Indonesian archipelago and beyond, including Java, the Maluku and Goa, among other places. The largest group of people attributed a ‘Malay’ origin came as soldiers also from disparate places such as Bali, Java, Riau, Ambon and peninsular Malaysia. As recorded in Hussainmiya (1987: 48), “almost all the major ethnic groups from the region of the Eastern archipelago were represented”. In fact, these peoples have been known as *Ja Minissu* by the Sinhalese and *Java Manusar* by the Tamils: ‘people from Java’ (Saldin 2003: 3). It was the British who, upon finding a community who spoke ‘Malay’, attached the corresponding ethnic label to the group, and it is this designation ‘Malay’ that has persisted.

Historical records lead us to postulate at least three different communities in the early days of the diaspora. First, there was a rather sophisticated diaspora of noblemen – nobility exiled during Dutch occupation of the East Indies – who typically would be deported together with their families. As mentioned above, political dissenters were also deported. Second was a large contingent of soldiers imported first by the

mentation of Endangered Languages (DoBeS) for the project *The documentation of Sri Lanka Malay: Linguistic and cultural creolisation endangered* (II/80 155) (Principal investigator: Umberto Ansaldi). We express our gratitude to all the Sri Lanka Malay communities who have been warm and welcoming, and open to and immensely supportive of our research. We thank Hugo Cardoso and other participants of the panel on language endangerment and language preservation in South Asia, which convened at ISCTE-IUL in Lisbon (Portugal) in July 2012, as part of the 22nd European Conference on South Asian Studies, for their comments on our paper presented there.

Dutch to form a ‘Malay’ garrison to fight against native rulers. This would become the Ceylon Rifle Regiment under the British who continued the same practice (cf. Ricklefs 1974). The soldiers were often accompanied by their wives, a practice encouraged during Dutch and British rule (Sourjah 2003; Ansaldo 2008, 2009). A third group comprising convicts, slaves and indentured laborers was also present probably from as early as Portuguese occupation, and such importation surely existed through both Dutch and British rule. This last group would also have been rather heterogeneous ethnically and linguistically but historical records do not provide us with any detail about size or specific provenance (Hussainmiya 1990; Ansaldo 2008, 2009). Contacts between the groups were indeed quite frequent, due among other reasons to the practice of employing noblemen as officers of the troops, master-servant relations and a common, Islamic faith (Hussainmiya 1987, 1990). Overall, it can be seen that the community of Malays in Sri Lanka consisted of not just single individuals but also family, retinue, and network ties, which settled in the community.

1.2. THE VERNACULAR. The formation of the vernacular known as Sri Lanka Malay (SLM) has been described as the outcome of language contact between early Malay varieties, including vernaculars and *lingua francas*, brought over from the Indonesian archipelago, with local languages, in particular Sinhala and Lankan Tamil, the dominant languages of Sri Lanka. It is widely known that a *lingua franca* generally referred to as Bazaar Malay functioned as a wide-spread language of intercultural communication throughout the Indonesian and Malay world (Adelaar 1996; Wurm et al. 1995). It is such a language that would have allowed the early Malay settlers to communicate across their vernacular varieties as diverse as Javanese, Balinese, Ambonese, etc.

Ansaldo (2009, 2011) captures the process of language creation as one of metatypy (see also Bakker 2006; Nordhoff 2009) leading to a hybrid profile of Lankan grammar and Malay-derived lexicon. The most obvious illustration of metatypy in SLM is to be found in the nominal domain, in particular the case system (see Table 1). The emblematic language, a Malay variety variously referred to as Bazaar, Trade or Vehicular – a Pidgin-derived Malay (PDM) variety following the typology of contact Malay varieties put forward in Adelaar (1996, 2005) – has, in line with other Austronesian

languages, no morphological marking of case on the Noun. The dominant languages in the multilingual ecology in which SLM evolves, Sinhala and Lankan Tamil, both show typical case systems of the South Asian type. Due to the known congruence between these two languages, there is a certain degree of functional overlap in the two systems (Ansaldo 2009, 2011). What is crucial here is that SLM shows systematic restructuring of its NP to map the case systems of Lankan type, as shown in Table 1 below (synthesized from Ansaldo 2009: 129– 131)

CASE	FUNCTION(S)		
	Sri Lanka Malay	Sinhala	Tamil
Dative	Exp, G, Ben, Poss	Exp, G, Ben, Poss	Exp, G, Ben, Poss
Nominative	Agent	Agent	Agent
Accusative	Patient	Patient	Patient
Genitive	Possession	Temp.poss, Loc	Temp.poss, Loc
Instrumental	Instr. Source	Instr. Source	Instr.
Comitative	Association	Association	Association

TABLE 1: Case in Sri Lankan Malay, Sinhala and Lankan Tamil

Notes on abbreviations: Experiential (Exp), Goal (G), Benefactive (Ben), Possessive (Poss), Temporary possession (Temp. poss), Locative (Loc), Instrumental (Instr)

Worth noting for our purposes here are the following points:

- The overwhelming typological restructuring that leads an original Malay variety without morphological case marking (typical for Malayic in general) to develop a case system of the South Asian type, with a dominant, multifunctional and obligatory Dative case, and a weak Accusative case mostly used to mark definite objects (Ansaldo 2008, 2009);
- The structural overlap in all three languages in the three core cases Dative, Nominative and Accusative;
- The particular structural parallel in the SLM and Sinhala Instrumental-Ablative syncretism;

- The reanalysis of PDM lexical items (PDMLex) into case markers (Ansaldò 2009: 129).

This overwhelming typological restructuring has been explained through the typological pressure that Sinhala and Tamil combined exercise over the emblematic original Malay variety, in a typical metatypic scenario. This can be observed in particular in three noteworthy syntactic-semantic alignments happening here in the emblematic language (Ansaldò 2011):

- (a) General VO > OV shift; from Austronesian to Lankan word-order;
- (b) Following (a) the grammaticalization of [PDMLex + N] into [N-Case Marker];
- (c) In parallel with (b) the semantic obligation to express (core) cases.

The following examples (adapted from Nordhoff 2009: 483) illustrate the features listed in (a) to (c):

- (1) *Go=dang karang bannyak thàràsìggar*
I=DAT now very sick
'I am very sick now'
- (2) *Titanic kappal=yang su-thìnggalam*
T ship=ACC PAST-sink
'The ship Titanic sank'
- (3) *Police=dering su-dhaatang*
Police=INSTR PAST-come
'The police came'

Ansaldò (2009: 129) suggests the following possible etymologies for the case markers above, though these remain speculative:

- DAT *nang* from Malay *nang* 'towards';
- ACC *yang* from Malay *-nya*, a definiteness marker;
- INSTR/ABL *dering* (often reduced to *ring*) from Jakarta *bikin* 'to make'.

It must be pointed out that this is a rather radical restructuring for a

number of reasons (Ansaldo 2009):

- What we see is a case of development of morphology, i.e. an increase in morphological complexity not usually associated with contact-induced change (Bakker 2006; Ansaldo & Nordhoff 2009);
- The development of case systems is normally a complex gradual process that requires many generations of speakers.

Such radical restructuring leads us to believe that an overwhelming typological pressure must lie behind the changes, which could be explained by a scenario in which acquisition takes place in a trilingual environment in which Malay, Sinhala, and Tamil compete. Nordhoff (2013) offers a historical account of the formation of SLM in which five different phases of formation are postulated, summarized below. As we can see he suggests that the restructuring described above would have occurred in the middle phase of the development of SLM:

1. Dialect leveling, in which different varieties of Malay emerge as a more homogeneous variety;
2. Substrate reinforcement, during which Malay features that are present in one of the adstrates, Sinhala or Tamil, are retained;
3. Where the problem lies: ‘creolization’ or metatypy? Nordhoff’s answer is metatypy, which according to him hold along the lines laid out in Ansaldo (2008, 2009): typological convergence led by frequency effects;
4. Shift² to Sinhala/ attrition: increased bilingualism in Sinhala leads to shift towards the dominant language;
5. Independent (recent/ new) developments (i.e. not contact-induced).

Point 3 is particularly important because it makes reference to a debate initiated by the work of Smith et al. (see 2004): these authors suggest that SLM may be the product of a creole-like scenario in which Tamil-Malay language contact led to a restructuring process. However extensive work by Nordhoff (2009) has shown that there is substantial Sinhalese influence

²Nordhoff uses ‘convergence’ but he really seems to mean shift.

in SLM grammar, requiring an explanation that considers the role of this language in the formation of SLM. In addition, historical work by Ansaldo (2009) has shown the lack of historical evidence behind the claim of strong Tamil influence in the evolution of the SLM community. Most recently Bakker (2013) provides genetic evidence against the claim of significant Tamil influence.

It should also be noted that, in addition to SLM, another crucial feature of the linguistic repertoire of the Malays in Sri Lanka that is particularly significant is their multilingualism (Lim & Ansaldo 2007): the Malay community has always been perhaps the most multilingual of all the co-existing Sri Lankan communities – Sinhalese, Tamils, Burghers – having in their repertoire the main languages spoken on the island, namely Sinhala and Tamil, alongside SLM, and in some strata, also that of their colonisers. The community in contemporary times is still clearly multilingual. This view is not uncontroversial: in particular Bakker (2013) suggests that multilingualism might not have been widespread in the past. More importantly Rassool (2013) questions the extent to which such multilingualism may be relevant for identity construction in the SLM community. Her findings suggest that SLM community members do attach high value to the SLM vernacular. We fully agree with this view which, crucially, is not incompatible with the observation that much of the SLM community is rather multilingual. In the most recent census (Department of Census and Statistics 2012), a significantly higher proportion of Malays report an ability to speak, and to read and write (49.7% and 61.2%) the three major languages Sinhala, Tamil and English, compared to the other ethnic groups (Sinhala, Sri Lanka Tamil, Indian Tamil, Sri Lanka Moor and Burgher) who have proportions no higher than about 12%, apart from the Burghers (20% and 12.4%) and the Sri Lanka Moors (26.7% and 28%), which are still significantly lower than the Malays. This is corroborated in a survey of the Malay community in the capital Colombo (Lim & Ansaldo 2006a), in which some two-thirds speak at least four languages – SLM, English, Sinhala and Tamil – with the remainder merely having Tamil absent from this multilingual repertoire (also see Table 2).

1.3. THE PROCESS. In many multilingual communities around the world, where multilingualism is not institutionally supported through schools,

education, and other institutions, multilingual individuals may experience shifts within their multilingual competence. For example, if one of the codes used becomes limited to the home domain, it typically grows weak, and interference from the more frequently used languages is expected. This essentially is language attrition which results from processes of shift and partial maintenance, as discussed in Thomason & Kaufman (1988):

- There is gradual abandonment of ancestral language (AL). This is typical for minority groups under (a) colonization and (b) nation-expansion processes and it is usually associated with stigmatized linguistic codes;
- The actual loss happens in the transition from monolingualism in AL to multilingualisms in L2/L3 as L2/L3 take over domains of usage;
- The number of AL speakers gradually decreases and so does competence in AL, but if AL has vitality, some features survive; if not, death occurs.

In the transition process described above, L2/3 dominant individuals are responsible for the transfer of L2/3 features into AL. These individuals lead the change through intense code-mixing, during which structural and lexical transfer from the dominant languages interferes with features from the eroding code.

2. THE MODERN ERA

2.1. THE COMMUNITY. Census data show that, from the late 1800s to the beginning of the third millennium, the Malays have consistently comprised approximately 0.3% of the population. They are still today a numerical minority in Sri Lanka, with the majority Sinhalese comprising two-thirds to three-quarters of the population, and a significant minority of Tamils comprising a quarter of the population.³ They can also, and perhaps more markedly, be seen to constitute a minority in name: in the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948, they have been grouped together with the Sri Lankan Moors (Tamil-speaking people tracing their ancestry to Arab traders who arrived

³ Population censuses provide the following data (selected): in 1881: Sinhalese 66.7%, Tamil 25%; in 1953: Sinhalese 70%, Tamil 23%; in 2001: Sinhalese 80%, Tamil 9% (but this excludes *Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam* areas); in all censuses, up until 2001, Malays are a constant 0.3%.

in Sri Lanka between the 8th and 15th centuries) and Indian Moors (from India) as ‘Moors’ (Official Website of the Government of Sri Lanka) or ‘Muslims’ (Sri Lanka Government Web Portal), or presented together as “Moors, Malays, Burghers (of Portuguese & Dutch descent) and others” (Government of Sri Lanka 2014),⁴ and have not had a distinct identity as ‘Malays’ at this official level, though a distinct SLM identity is clearly perceived at the inter- and intra-communal level. They therefore possess relatively low symbolic capital within their own country, and the level of ethnolinguistic vitality from the objective criterion of institutional support (Giles, Bourhis & Taylor 1977) can be assessed as low.

Their status within the country nonetheless seems to have always been quite high. As outlined above, a majority of the ancestors of the Colombo, Kandy and Hambantota communities would have been Javanese nobility exiled during the wars of succession in Java during Dutch rule. Official documents of 1792, for example, list 176 individuals belonging to 23 families of royalty and nobility exiled together with their families from Java, Batavia and Sumatra to Ceylon (Burah 2006: 44). The older Javanese, because of their proficiency in Dutch, were appointed *Hoofd de Maha Badda* (Sinhala *maha badda* ‘great trade’, referring to the cinnamon industry first established by the Sinhala king in the 1500s for Portuguese trade) or *Hoofd de Cinnamon*, namely, the ‘captain’ supervising the cinnamon gardens, the spice being one of the most precious commodities during Dutch rule (Burah 2006: 39-42f.); with increased production of cinnamon, these superior officers would be rewarded with more power, promotions and privileges (Burah 2006: 59). Most of the exiles became enlisted in the military, and were later retained under the British as members of the Malay Regiment where, although they dropped their royal titles, they did nonetheless maintain their status (Burah 2006: 46-47). After the disbandment of the regiment in 1873, many of these joined the tea estates and functioned as intermediaries between the English superintendents and the Indian labor force (Saldin 2003: 10). In short, although officially symbolic recognition would appear to be low, the Malays have held a status amongst the communities that has been high, in no small part due to their origins and their multilingual linguistic abilities.

⁴In censuses, though, Sinhalese, Sri Lanka Tamil, Indian Tamil, Sri Lanka Moor, Burgher, Malay, and Other are separate ethnicity categories.

COMMUNITY	CHARACTERISTICS
Colombo	Middle-upper class community in capital city; restricted usage of SLM in old-middle generations now under revitalization efforts; common Sinhala (and some Tamil) competence; English fairly fluent to native speaker competence; no SLM in younger generation
Slave Island	Lower class community in a poor district of Colombo; wide-spread SLM usage; strong Tamil influences; no English
Kandy & other Upcountry	Middle-lower class communities in the central hill country area; SLM in old-middle generations, and in some younger generation; Sinhala and Tamil competence; some English proficiency.
Hambantota	Community on the south coast, traditionally heavy Sinhalese-speaking area; SLM in old-middle generations; often trilingual with Sinhala and Tamil; limited English
Kirinda	Fishing community on southeast coast; SLM dominant in all generations; fully trilingual with Sinhala and Tamil, especially in middle-younger generations; English limited to a few individuals

TABLE 2: Sri Lanka Malay communities and vitality

It is consequently not surprising that – in spite of their lack of identity in the Ceylon Citizenship Act – the Sri Lanka Malays’ own identity has always been vibrant. The Malays are found in various communities located around the island, who vary in their socioeconomic and educational status, their linguistic repertoire and communicative practices, and whose SLM varieties show some variation, as summarized in Table 2 (Lim & Ansaldo 2006b, 2007; Ansaldo 2008). While there is a strong sense of identity and separateness for each of the different communities (SLM community p.c. 2003-2006), they nonetheless all identify themselves as Sri Lankan Malays. This has surely been the case since colonial rule where this ‘Malay’

diaspora is testified to being a close-knit community, in which contacts between the different Malay/Indonesian ethnicities as well as the different social extractions were maintained through the ranks of the army as well as through common religious practice (Ricklefs 1974). There is also much awareness and expression of their culture and ancestry (e.g. Saldin 2003; Burah 2006), and there are a large number of social and cultural groups, including, for example, the Sri Lanka Malay Confederation (SLAMAC) (the umbrella organization), the Sri Lanka Malay Rupee Fund, the Conference of Sri Lanka Malays (COSLAM), and Malay Associations of the communities located around the island, which are all extremely active in the organization of regular social, cultural, commemorative and fund-raising activities and initiatives (Ansaldó & Lim field notes 2003-2007). Given their dense and multiplex networks, it is not surprising that SLM has been widely spoken as a home language for generations (Hussainmiya 1987).

2.2. IDEOLOGY. It is quite possible that, until the advent of early linguists visiting Sri Lanka in the second half of the 20th century, there was little awareness of the differences between the ancestral language and Standard Malay. Let us not forget that, apart from SLM, the communities have been inherently multilingual, mixing Sinhala, Tamil as well as colonial varieties (Lim & Ansaldó 2007). As a consequence of the religious narrative and the mistaken identification with Tamil Muslims, early attempts at description place SLM as a mixed language of Tamil and Malay descent. As revealed in the first phases of our documentation process, this label carried negative stigma and can be directly related to a certain loss of prestige of SLM from this moment on. The mistaken interpretation of SLM communities as Tamil-Malay ‘hybrid’, has led to the infelicitous classification of Sri Lanka Malay as a ‘creole’: it is referred to as a creole in an early account by a historian (Hussainmiya 1987), by linguists (see e.g. Smith, Paauw & Hussainmiya 2004), and it is listed as Sri Lankan Creole Malay in *Ethnologue* (Gordon 2005; Lewis et al. 2013). As noted in Garrett (2006: 180f.), and as has been shown in the case of SLM (Ansaldó & Lim 2006; Lim & Ansaldó 2006b, 2007), such a classification, besides being defective on historical as well as theoretical grounds (Aboh & Ansaldó 2007; Ansaldó & Matthews 2007), in fact has a significant impact on the type of shift that may occur as well as its speed: the awareness of speaking a ‘corrupt’ or ‘broken’ variety, as is often

implied in the current definition of creole languages, may lead to a perception of their linguistic variety as not being ‘good’ enough to maintain, and further strengthens a community’s desire to move away to a more standard variety (see also Rassool 2013). Indeed, it has been argued that contact languages are particularly endangered, given their marginalization amongst languages in general and endangered languages in particular (Garrett 2006: 178).⁵ This first phase would be responsible for the rise of forces advocating a shift to Standard Malay in the community.

As mentioned above, one reaction to a stigmatization of the ancestral language came in the form of appeals to introduce the Standard Malay variety of Malaysia into Sri Lanka. This made particular good sense in the urban community of Colombo where younger generations had already completely lost competence in SLM, and where exposure to global Malay institutions such as the Malay High Commission made this option viable. However this idea was based on a very limited understanding of the extreme differences between these two varieties. Recall that, while SLM is a radical restructured variety that has undergone metatypic changes (see Ross 1996) that render it grammatically closer to Sinhala than to any Austronesian language, the early Malays would have been speakers of the Malay lingua franca that existed since the 1st millennium AD in the monsoon Asia region, most often referred to as Bazaar Malay (Adelaar & Prentice 1996). SLM is mutually unintelligible with any colloquial Malay variety we know of; they can therefore be considered different languages. Nonetheless attempting to shift towards the standard language of Malaysia made excellent sense in terms of linguistic capital. It would allow the community to move from a stigmatized creole variety to a prestigious national and global language symbolizing modernity as well as a strong Islamic identity.

When we entered the picture in 2004 as a DoBeS team aiming for a thorough documentation of SLM language and culture, a number of things changed. Documentation brought recognition to SLM as a variety with scientific capital and thus the bias towards its creole or mixed nature was partly reversed. It became also obvious over time that acquiring Standard Malay was not the same as revitalizing SLM, and eventually the latter became a priority in the community and affected the appeal of

⁵ In spite of this, our project documenting SLM was, in 2004, the first DoBeS project documenting a ‘creole’.

the former. As a consequence of the documentation project, SLM gained attention in the international community, and a number of publications reached the community, strengthening the perception that SLM was a unique identity separate from Malaysia and Indonesia and unlike any other within Sri Lanka. The unprecedented attention that SLM is receiving now, not only from Western intellectual powerhouses, but crucially from local linguistic institutions, further strengthens the renewed prestige of an SLM identity centered in, but not exclusively limited to, its ancestral language. Where previously, cultural associations in Colombo such as COSLAM communicated in English, they now make a point of holding their meetings in SLM. Through a reevaluation of their linguistic capital, SLM communities are now focusing a lot of energy on maintenance and revitalization of the ancestral language.

2.3. IDENTITY. In addition to a revitalized ideology of its own language, SLM identity is strengthened by vibrant historical and religious narratives as described below.

To start with, it is possible to entertain the theory that, in the 7th century AD, a powerful trading network of the Indonesian archipelago started extending its reach to the South Asian subcontinent. Known as the Srivijaya culture, these traders sailed to Tamil Nadu as well as Sri Lanka probably on their way to the Arabian Peninsula, and established regular trading hamlets in this part of the Indian Ocean and the Arab Sea (see Ansaldo 2009). While there is no solid historical or archeological evidence for this so far, this narrative is present among members of the SLM community and underlies their identification with an era that pre-dates Western colonial expansion and carries an aura of prestige and power. Until the advent of the Chola dynasty in South India (9th century AD), Srivijaya fleets commanded much respect in the region, and thus constitute a powerful association for the purpose of a 'Malay' identity in Sri Lanka. Though it is difficult to prove whether Hambantota was really founded by Indonesian and Malay traders, as some community members believe, the quasi-mythical association plays a role in local writings and narrative in SLM origins and identity.

Secondly, during British colonial rule a regiment of soldiers of Malay and Indonesian provenance had established itself as a significant power to keep order among local Lankan ethnicities. The Ceylon Rifle Regiment

(Hussainmiya 1990) was a prestigious institution that could lead to attractive careers after service; indeed many former soldiers ended up as police officers, plantation overseers and other official positions under British rule. Association with the history of the Regiment is important in SLM historiography as it portrays the Malays as the chosen group in colonial Sri Lanka, above the local majority of Sinhalese and the significant minority of Lankan Tamils. Already during Dutch rule a practice of bringing over fighters from the Indonesian and Malay colonies had resulted in the Malays being regarded as fierce and dependable soldiers, qualities that are still glorified in local historiography of the SLM community. When we trace the origins of SLM families, it is clear that the fact that the Malays were not natural allies of Lankan ethnic groups, and that they were in possession of a multilingual repertoire, together made them the natural, chosen intermediaries between colonizers and locals in both Dutch and British Sri Lanka (Ansaldo 2009).

Finally, it is crucial to realize that SLMs are Muslim. This is a strong centripetal force within the community island-wide that clearly sets them apart from all other groups with the exception of the Moors.⁶ It is clear that religious affiliation has been a strong factor in maintaining a distinct cultural and linguistic identity. A weekly prayer in SLM is still being offered at the Slave Island Mosque.

3. FINAL REMARKS. Ansaldo (2011) presents the cultural process that contributes to the emergence of a unique SLM identity as a matter of alignment. Identity alignment refers to language shift and linguistic restructuring observed in many multilingual diasporic minorities caught in the crossfire of two, opposed trends: (i) convergence to the dominant culture(s) and (ii) preservation of unique own identity. It is within such a conceptual framework that the process of creation of a new grammar such as SLM can be understood.

While studies of SLM so far have mostly focused on the internal forces that drive the linguistic dynamics that typify the evolution of SLM, this paper has also introduced relevant external agents. The distinction between internal and external is of course in itself a simplification, as these cannot always easily be kept apart. It is true that what characterizes the uniqueness

⁶The Moors are descendants of Arab, Gujarati and Tamil traders who also follow the Muslim faith.

of SLM is a final act of maintenance that originates within the community: without retention of Malay-derived items, the process of shift towards Lankan grammar would have run its course and the Malay vernacular would have been lost. At the same time, the restructuring of the grammar is led by the typological pressure of languages acquired within the community for sure, but originally belonging to external groups. The more recent stigma associated to the notion of ‘Creole’, though introduced by external agents to the community, was quickly appropriated by community members wanting a shift in language practices. Finally, with the emergence of local linguists who champion the value of SLM originally introduced by external documentarists, the boundaries between external and internal are indeed blurred.

In conclusion, in addition to offering an overview of the socio-historical and linguistic documentation of SLM, we hope to have contributed with the following relevant observations for the practice of documentation and conservation:

- A strong cultural identity is essential for vitality, and is a process of negotiation between ideologies upheld within the community, and ideas projected upon the community from the outside;
- The outside refers not only to the known institutions, including policies, education and economy, but, crucially for us, includes linguists, in the form of both the ‘touch and go’ data collectors as well as the more heavy-handed Language Documentation and Description practitioners. In this sense, we are powerful agents of identity construction processes and the related vitality attached to it;
- The discourse of endangerment as a whole, as it grows and reaches minority groups around the world, becomes an essential measure for linguistic vitality. It has a significant positive impact on communities whose language is in need of revitalization, and this also means it has a powerful role to play in the dynamics of identity construction and identity alignment.

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